

GENDER, EDUCATION AND THE ONE-CHILD POLICY:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG CHINESE
WOMEN IN URBAN CHINA

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Many studies have interpreted the positive and negative consequences of China's One-Child Policy on Chinese women, but few have relied upon contribution from Chinese women and only children themselves. However, by valuing personal, lived experience, researchers may discourage the propagation of Western media stereotypes of what it means to be a young Chinese woman in urban China. The use of an intersectionality framework showcases how Chinese women's lived experiences must be framed more widely than a single aspect of their identity and that gender, educational experiences, family dynamic, and single child status (among other identity markers) form a more complex and holistic identity than any marker considered individually. This thesis argues that the intersectionality of lived experience makes it necessary to consider each individual's story as valuable and that commonalities and differences are both crucial to understanding how individual's lives intersect in the context of this complex birth policy.

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Dedicated to my parents, who taught me how to listen;
And my partner, who listens so well.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the final interview that I conducted in December 2013, Lihua (L. Tao, personal communication, December 5, 2013) asked me to keep recording after she had finished answering my final question. Lihua gently raised a hand as she smiled, looking down at the table we were sharing, then lowered it. When I prompted her, asking her if she wanted to add any other details to our discussion about her experiences, she said to me, “I just want to say, I really love my family... my friends always ask me why I didn’t argue with my mom every time I went back to China. I just said, why? Why should I argue with my mom?... It’s not necessary. Why [do] we need to argue?” She paused between her words. She seemed to be choosing them carefully. “We can just sit and talk with each other... So, yeah.” She declared this affirmative with a nod and paused again, still smiling. “They gave me a lot... so I also want to give back to them a lot.” These thoughts, shared with me unbidden, provided a thoughtful end not only to her interview, but a capstone concept to my research on the implications of the One-child policy. In the process of discussing her family background, her experiences as a young woman growing up as an only child and her educational background, the overarching theme she wanted me as the researcher to keep in mind was how her life had been principally shaped and directed by a mutually held love and respect from her parents.

Lihua was one of eleven Chinese students I interviewed during the fall and winter of 2013. These students represent a group of people whose lived experiences remain underrepresented in the literature about modern China: the girls who grow up in

urban China as single children because of the One-child policy. While existing literature focuses great attention on the Chinese economy, Chinese labor migration issues, the status of women in both rural and urban China, rural and urban gender gaps and access to education, and the effects of the One-child policy in certain Chinese contexts, few studies have been conducted on urban women girls who have grown up as single children because of the policy. Fewer studies still have engaged the experiences of this group of women in a way that acknowledges the complexity of their individual experiences.

In her 2004 volume *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*, Vanessa Fong writes about China's singleton phenomenon: the children who are products of the One-child policy. She describes her research in this book as "an ethnographic study of the consequences of the world's first state-mandated fertility transition"¹ (p. 2); in other words, a state policy mandating that families reduce their number of children so the next generation of young people will become well-educated, support their families, and pull China and the Chinese economy up to speed with other developed countries in the Global North with low birth rates and high economic power. As I will address in the literature review, in the 1970s Chinese officials introduced population reduction policies, culminating in the introduction of the One-child policy in 1979, as a means to "modernize" while also reducing environmental degradation and improving the economy. Fong writes, "The idea that low fertility would lead to personal as well as national modernization was part of fertility limitation propaganda" (p. 71) even earlier than the introduction of the One-child policy. The point of limiting fertility was

¹ The fertility transition that Fong writes about was modeled by Warren Thompson in the 1900s as the demographic transition, by which high birth and death rates shifted to low birth and death rates in a given country. This shift is often seen side-by-side with economic modernization which has caused many to associate these trends with one another. Fong addresses this in Chapter two of *Only Hope*, as cited in the Reference List.

not only based in efforts to improve the quality of family lives, but to improve all of China as well.

However, as Fong points out, in China the intended effects of the One-child policy to those who were born into it may not have turned out as planned. She writes, “Though it accelerated modernization, China’s state-mandated fertility transition also produced... unrealistic expectations for children’s success, fear that parents will not have enough support in old age, and widespread complaints about a rising generation of ‘spoiled’ singletons” (p. 179). In her associated work on singleton experiences with shifting gender expectations and intergenerational relationships, Fong takes an ethnographic approach that centers the lived experiences of Chinese young people, and describes the educational decisions that directly affect their families’ futures (2004, 2002). These studies, and the few existing others that tackle similar issues, encouraged me to pursue research that adds to existing literature on these topics.

As I read Fong’s work and the work of others interrogating the experiences of Chinese youth, Chinese women in particular, I was struck by the intersectional nature of the forces acting upon them, as well as the forces that sometimes came from within. I aimed to interrogate the complexity of Chinese women’s experiences because of the complexity of Chinese women’s identities. I recognize that all women identify with many different labels, including daughter, granddaughter, student, only child, sister, cousin, urban or rural resident. It is the intersection of these different labels that interest me, and the way that they weave together to influence individual experiences.

The completed studies and interviews of others led me to consider not only the importance of multiple identities, but the way that these identities influence one another.

Likewise, I questioned the influences of outside forces within society on multiple levels, and began forming a long list of questions about identity among this group of Chinese women. First and foremost, I wondered about their experiences being only children. As an only child myself, I had been raised by my parents in a way that my peers might have called “spoiled.” I received the best education possible at a private high school and a Seven Sisters college, the Ivy League of women’s colleges. At the same time, my parents had worked very hard to make these privileges possible for me, often at the expense of their own comfort. There was an understanding between my parents and I that I had a responsibility to provide for them in the future, and give back to the greater society because of the sacrifices they had endured on my behalf.

Beyond the single child experience, I wondered what role gender played in the lives of only children. In China, a traditionally patriarchal society, I had read extensively about the practices of son preference, ancestor worship, and filial piety, all of which centered on the men within a family. I wondered about the experiences of women in China who had grown up with the One-child policy as a way of life, and how their gender and their single child status had interacted with one another. I wondered if any had experienced tension within their families because of their gender. At the same time, I wondered how they interacted with their families, and what bearing their family backgrounds had on their experiences as only children. I wondered specifically if, because of their single child status, they had experienced privileges in their families, such as being the sole focus of love, attention, and economic support. Likewise, I wondered about the expectations placed upon them from their parents and extended families, be it

educational, social, or personal, and if those expectations differed from the expectations placed on boys.

Finally, I considered the Chinese education system and the interplay between education, the individual, the family dynamic, and society. In the cases of only children, I wondered how their status or role as only children affected their educational goals. I wondered if only children experienced more privileges in the realm of education than their counterparts with siblings would, and what, if any, role gender had played in acquisition of education in their lives.

After considering these multi-faceted themes, I identified a group of key questions upon which I based my interview research²:

1. How did growing up as an only child affect women's experiences?
2. Does experience indicate that the Chinese education system favors men over women, or vice versa?
3. What kind of expectations or pressures did women experience, and where did these expectations and pressures come from?
4. Did women experience privilege because they were only children?
5. Do individual ideas about or experiences with the One-child policy differ from the experiences that are promoted by the Western media?

Through interviewing Chinese international students at the University of Oregon, I learned a great deal about the experiences of a varied group of women. I will address my findings from these interviews in Chapters III and IV, and my research methods later in this chapter.

² For a full list of prepared questions, please see my research protocol in Appendix.

The timing of my study and its relationship to single child families is important. Since 2013 the One-child policy has undergone two major changes. In March of 2013, the Agency that had previously overseen the One-child policy (National Population and Family Planning Commission) merged with the Chinese Ministry of Health to create a National Health and Family Planning Commission (Xinhua, 03.10.2013). Later in 2013, the National People's Congress announced official plans to relax the One-child policy. In a November 15, 2013, news release from Xinhua News Agency, it reported that "The birth policy will be adjusted and improved step by step to promote 'long-term balanced development of the population in China,'" citing the report from the Congress and Chinese Communist Party.

If in fact the One-child policy will be relaxed to the extent it is believed in coming years, the shift could have significant demographic consequences. This is not necessarily because fertility rates are anticipated to rise dramatically in China, as Xinhua also notes. The change to the policy would allow single children to have a second child, which the news agency reports could lead to only a modest increase in fertility rates in China.³ The demographic consequences of equal concern to scholars of Chinese society relate to the social changes that may accompany this shift, particularly changes in the makeup of Chinese society. Whereas most children and young adults in urban China are now only children, this may not be the case for the next generation. Even if the quantity of only children remains substantial in Chinese cities, the fertility decisions made by only

³ Xinhua reports that while China's fertility rate is currently between 1.5 and 1.6 births per woman, the policy shift would cause the rate to increase to 1.8. This is still far below replacement level (around 2.0), and would help keep the country's population stable around 1.5 billion people.

child parents to have one child instead of two are markedly different from a government mandate requiring one child.

The time to study the single child phenomenon in China is now. The generation of Chinese only children written of in the spate of articles in the late 1990s (Marshall, 1998; Reese, 1999) have grown from children affected by the ‘Little Emperor Syndrome’⁴ into young adults. The earliest of the only children born after the One-child policy was adopted in 1979 are now in their 30s, many with children of their own. As the policy becomes more relaxed, what choices will these adults who were raised as only children make? What will others in younger generations choose?

Fong’s work on the collaborative effects of the policy on Chinese society, culture and economics have created a strong base from which I approached my own research into the lived experiences of my research subjects, all Chinese international students at the University of Oregon. In the United States, an increasingly large population of students comes from China, and Chinese international students represent the largest international student population in the country, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE). The IIE reported that in the 2011-2012 academic year, Chinese students accounted for 25.4% of all international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. The next largest group of international students, from India, accounted for 13.1% of international students by comparison. At the University of Oregon, where the international student population accounts for 2,524 students (International Student & Scholar Services), nearly 60% of that population comes from China (ibid.).

⁴ The ‘Little Emperor Syndrome’ is referenced in both Chinese and Western media as one of the negative effects of the One-child policy. The term refers to single boys born as only children, who are provided every luxury by their parents and grandparents. The ‘Little Emperors’ are considered by the media to be spoiled as young children, which affects the adults they will become. See Marshall (1997) and Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, (2013).

My decision to work with this particular group of Chinese young people was deliberate. In my original proposal I sought not only to address the issues related to the One-child policy, gender, family, and Chinese education, but also the choices that Chinese students make to study abroad, and what implications these choices have for American higher education. The data collected from my interviews included a great deal of information regarding the choices that these individuals had made, and provide further support to the importance of individual experience, as each individual spoke of her experiences and reasons for studying abroad differently. This is one site of further study that I will address again later.

Individual experience is a thread that ties together all of the issues that my interviews and research with Chinese women highlighted. It is the intersection of individual experience and variable and changing identity that form the basis of my theoretical framework. While it may seem self-explanatory, the importance of lived experience is something that has been at once both overlooked and levied as ammunition by theoretical opponents of the One-child policy. In the United States in particular, the media has had the tendency to portray the One-child policy in very negative ways, and similarly the children who grow up in China as only children.

Researchers portray Chinese children as “less trusting, less trustworthy, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals” (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan & Meng, 2013). The media, likewise, focuses its attention on the negative consequences of the One-child policy. The U.S. Congressional House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights released a hearing report in 2011 in which Chinese women testified about their personal experiences with what they

consider to be utilitarian enforcement of the One-child policy. These individuals' accounts were used as fodder for American partisan politics, and denounced the policy on the grounds it was barbaric and responsible for, essentially, systematic baby killing through forced abortion. Other organizations in the United States have written and posted online about gruesome applications of the One-child policy, and have publicly denounced the One-child policy as a policy espousing genocide based on gender, or "gendercide" (All Girls Allowed). Anti-One-child policy activists have used specific cases of police and/or doctor brutality to imply that the government employs extreme punitive measures when dealing with families who have broken the family planning law.⁵

These types of critiques present an inflammatory view of the policy, and yet they do not focus their attention on other valid critiques of the One-child policy. For example, while they address the gender gap that exists between girls and boys, they do not consider other fundamental problems such as the possible damage that the policy may cause to the Chinese economy. The Brookings-Tsinghua Institute writes that, "Over the next 20 years, the ratio of workers to retirees (presuming workers continue to retire at 60) will drop precipitously from roughly 5:1 today to just 2:1" (Wang 2012), which will have consequences on the government's ability to provide services for the rapidly aging population (ibid.). As fewer enter the workforce while the government remains responsible for supporting the growing elderly, the effects on young people in their later years are also uncertain.

Social factors are not the only ignored critiques of the One-child policy.

Researchers such as Short, Ma and Yuan have found that as of the early-mid 1990s a

⁵ Perusal of the website for the organization "All Girls Allowed" shows both the religious bend of the organization as well as its reliance on shocking stories, language, and pictures, specifically on police violence and forced abortions. For more information, visit www.allgirlsallowed.org/blog.

remarkably large percentage of people in China used birth control (91%), and that most of these birth control methods were either permanent (sterilization, 46%) or semi-permanent via intra-uterine device (IUD)(41%) (2000, p. 281). The authors point out that in many cases individuals did not have control over the decision to accept or deny these reproductive choices, and beyond that, what type of birth control method would be proscribed for them. However, because this and other critiques have not fit into a particular political agenda (they are not related to abortion, female infanticide, or abandonment) they cannot be used as a political platform in the United States. This is a great oversight of the messaging that is released as the “authentic” Chinese experience of the One-child policy. Far from being helpful, these representations of Chinese women’s experiences do not accurately portray the experiences of all Chinese women. They portray the experiences of some women, while silencing the experiences of millions more. They do not describe the ways that single children may experience some benefits or privilege from their status as only children, they do not accurately represent families who have chosen not to conform to the policy, and they do not describe families who have chosen to only have one child because they only wanted one child.

Women in China represent a very broad category of people, and each person has had different experiences in her life. For this reason I chose to focus my research on patterns of similarity and difference among the lived experiences of a small number of research subjects. I based my focus on individualism and interconnection on an intersectionality framework, drawing upon the earlier work of the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw focusing on the “multidimensionality of Black women’s experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences” (1989, p. 140). Rather than focus on

just one point of analysis, it is the interplay of different forces affecting the lives of Chinese women that provide a clearer understanding of their individual lived experience.

In more specific terms, I have taken “an intersectional approach to understanding race and gender... in which consideration is given to the unique positions that exist for people on the bases of the combination of their race/ethnicity and gender” (Settles, 2006, p. 589). Rather than focus on just race/ethnicity and gender as contributing factors, I will focus on single child status, gender, education, and family dynamic.

There is basis in the existing literature for conducting my interviews in this way. In the large-scale survey upon which Fong bases her analysis of education, single child status, and modernization (2004), she used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. She notes that, “ethnography is useful for providing glimpses of the agency, emotions, and cultural models of individuals” (p. 22), making her larger quantitative research more individually accessible and also more representative of those she has agreed to represent. Liu (2006) also draws attention to the importance of individual experience and representation, within the context of cultural understanding and flexibility. Liu writes that using qualitative research methods allowed her to give a more nuanced understanding of the lives of Chinese women workers, and notes that “I have given them a voice but I have also been able to show, and to account for, the points at which their words reflect a ‘public’ rather than a ‘personal’ narrative” (p. 51). In her work, therefore, beyond being able to share their individual stories, Liu can also place them in the larger context of Chinese culture and society. This is something I also hope to convey in my own research.

Methodology

I designed my study to consist of a group of 10-20 female research subjects, aged 18-28. My target demographic were Chinese international students currently enrolled at the University of Oregon, only children, self-identified women and biologically female, who originally come from and who attended secondary school in a major Chinese city (identified as a city with more than one million inhabitants). I hoped to interview a broad range of students based on point of origin, age, socioeconomic status, and type of secondary school attended in China.

The target population for the study was designed to help ensure that the data collected will contain a measure of consistency. Since the study focused on Chinese women who are only children, it was initially important that my participants have those characteristics. By interviewing female, woman-identified students I aimed to eliminate potential gendered differences in answers to interview questions. Additionally, since the research questions investigated women's experiences, I felt confident in designing questions addressing issues such as gender-based discrimination that only women may experience. The broad age range and point of origin within China were designed to allow for a breadth of experiences, which I believed would strengthen any conclusions I would draw about the target population.

I anticipated recruiting study participants in numerous ways, using snowball sampling with multiple start points. At the beginning of the research project I identified three starts: University of Oregon's Office of International Student & Scholar Services

(ISSS), which agreed to send a mass email on my behalf to the entire community of Chinese international students; posting informational flyers at strategic locations around campus such as the Mills International Center, International Affairs Office, and the Yamada Language Center; and personal referrals and individual work with campus groups that support Chinese international students such as the Chinese Student Association.

Before conducting research I designed a confidential demographic survey that I planned to send out to the community of Chinese international students through ISSS at the University. This survey asked students to identify themselves in several key demographic categories: age, gender, family socioeconomic status, city and city size, place of high school graduation, family size, and contact information. The goal of this survey was threefold: first, because I anticipated sending it to the entire population of Chinese students, I anticipated a high yield of return because of the size of the Chinese population of the University; second, I wanted to build the most diverse sample possible, including people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and points of origin; third, I wanted to make sure that each of my interviews fit the demographic profile I had targeted.

The most fruitful of my starts turned out to be personal referral and communication. Mostly using personal referrals and word of mouth, I conducted eleven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women aged 19-27 during the University of Oregon's fall term of 2013. Of these interviews, all were women, all identified their families as middle class, ten of eleven were only children, and nine of eleven came from Chinese cities with over one million inhabitants. I conducted these interviews over the course of approximately eight weeks. Each interview consisted of two separate meetings, one informational (informal) and one interview-based (formal). As I wished for my

interview subjects to be comfortable talking to me, I asked to meet each of them informally before conducting the interview. Some subjects had little knowledge of my personal background in China, and did not understand my reasons for conducting this research.

When I met them for the first time, usually for a chat over coffee or tea that lasted up to an hour, I explained my background and the purposes of my study. Many were intrigued to learn that I had lived in China for two years, first during elementary school and then again as a high school student. When I spoke to them in Chinese, they became increasingly more comfortable. When I explained that I was not conducting my research in order to highlight all of the inherent evils of the One-child policy, they relaxed even more. When we talked about shared experiences in China, and shared experiences as exchange students or living outside of our home countries, they saw me as a peer. Finally, when I described to them my perspective on the value of individual, lived experience, they understood that I would count their experiences as valid, and would use their experiences to interrogate the dominant messaging that surrounds gender, education, the One-child policy, and family life in China.

As I began collecting research subjects, I found the need to broaden my demographic group in order to include some unique perspectives. I chose to include interviews with one participant who met all demographic groups but city size, and one participant who had siblings. The inclusion of these two accounts adds breadth to my analysis of similarity and difference, which will be the basis for my discussion chapters. While these particular women may not have met every single demographic criterion, by completing interviews with them I discovered that using their experiences helped to bolster my findings, giving me more robust data.

When I approached the interviews at the outset, I had already considered a list of experiences that I expected to find. I had formed a hypothesis in advance of the project and based my research design around finding the answers I expected. While the design did not prove detrimental to my findings, the interviews I collected seldom proceeded in the manner which I expected, and I noted with interest that some interviews I anticipated would be the most difficult or controversial turned out to be the opposite. Likewise, interviews I did not expect became influential in my analysis of trends. In some cases, these unexpectedly candid and reflexive interviews were the basis for case studies.

I prepared a script to inform each participant of the consent procedure at the start of each interview. As a part of this procedure I also informed them that their name would be changed and that any identifying information would be withheld or likewise changed. In my analysis section to follow in Chapters III and IV, all names for my eleven participants are aliases and any indications of their home cities have been revised to reflect greater anonymity.

I was pleased that during the interviews a participant never asked to stop, or told me that I had asked an inappropriate question; neither did they show any signs of discomfort with the subject matter. However, some of the subjects which I had anticipated to be controversial topics (gender in general, and gender within the context of education more specifically) did not elicit the response I expected. At the same time, topics that I anticipated would elicit little commentary were, in fact, very popular discussion points.

The One-child policy was a great example. I anticipated that many of my participants would not be eager to talk about the policy for a number of reasons. On one

hand, having lived in China for an extended period of time, I am sensitive to the fact that many people feel uncomfortable talking about the government or government policy. On the other hand, I theorized that if participants did want to talk about the policy, they would share few personal details, or would express most of their beliefs on the policy from the realistic perspective of: “this is the policy that exists, so there is no use considering how life would be otherwise.” However, to my surprise, many participants were eager to talk about the policy and how it had affected them. Many told stirring stories about things that had happened to their own families that related to the policy, or described having mixed emotions about its current application in China. This experience taught me something about my own assumptions.

When I began interviewing I also learned the many uses of open-ended question, and found myself following the carefully constructed order of questions less and less as I completed more interviews. While useful in the design stage, I had to be flexible enough in my interviews to understand when certain topics did not interest my interviewees, and adjust accordingly. While I realize that to some this may come across as inconsistency within the data set, as I do not present the findings as quantitative data, I see the situation differently. By showing flexibility in my interviews and simply not “sticking to the script” I was better able to assess what topics my participants considered most important, which was crucial in presenting their individual stories and lived experiences.

I also believe that the study was aided by my personal background. In some cases, the fact that I spoke some Mandarin with my participants helped to put them at ease; in other cases, my explanation of valuing personal experience ingratiated me with the participant, who may have felt as though no one had ever taken the time to ask about and

really listen to her life story. For some participants, my understanding of Chinese culture and willingness to ask difficult cultural questions made them feel more comfortable talking to me. Anecdotally, after the interviews were complete, two participants commented that when they talked with me, even though they were not using their native language, they felt like they were sharing their experiences with another Chinese person, a cultural insider.

While this has by no means been a conclusive study on the experiences of Chinese urban only children, Chinese women, or Chinese education, I posit that a truly conclusive study is impossible because of the broad range of personal experiences that these studies can include. Rather than conclusive, what I have aimed to provide is a comprehensive study, one that covers a range of issues, is sensitive to the experiences to a group of people while also being inclusive of a broad range of experiences.

As Liu writes, because “qualitative research is still relatively rare in China and academic interviews are new to most people” (2006. 45), it is important in qualitative research to consider local customs in order to make research collaborators feel comfortable participating in research. Liu notes here that reciprocity is an important idea, and one that helps to ease first time social interactions. In Liu’s case, gifts of fruit were perceived by her interviewees as a show of thanks and hospitality (ibid.), and speaking to the interviewees in their local dialect helped to establish the researcher as an insider. While my approach to interviews was not identical, I took these considerations into account as I planned out my interviews.

The reciprocity that Liu describes, in the context of my qualitative methods with a sample of young Chinese women, affected my technique for becoming an ‘insider’

among the women I interviewed. These methods were well-received by my participants. If we had never met before, their general approach at first was reservation. However, after the initial, informal meeting I described, many were more open to sharing their experiences with me. Similarly, I indicated in my communication with them prior to meeting that I would provide them a service in return for their time and effort. Having worked as an English tutor and writing mentor since undergraduate school, I offered my tutoring services to participants for one half-hour, as a token of thanks for their participation. The application of reciprocity and collaboration helped my participants feel comfortable with me.

As I completed my interviews during the months of October, November and December of 2013, I was struck by the sincerity and openness of my participants at every turn. While I understand that small sample sizes do not present the most compelling or statistically significant of quantitative data, the qualitative methods that I used present compelling insight into the lives of individuals, and privileges the stories of these individuals.

In the following chapters I will recount the stories that the women I interviewed shared with me, and will use their experiences as case studies of the importance and power of individual experience. These stories not only provide texture to the dominant narrative expressing what it means to be Chinese, but often challenge common perceptions about what it means to live in China, to be a student in China, to have siblings or no siblings in China, and to engage with social systems that aim to privilege the collective voice rather than the individual.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topics of gender, education, family structure and dynamic, and family planning policy in China have received a fair amount of study. Particularly in the context of development and strategic national and international planning, these concepts and the ways they weave together has been identified broadly as noteworthy in an international context. Of particular interest to the worldwide development community have been education and gender, and how they collaborate in developing countries such as China to create greater individual freedoms in the framework of a Western cultural and socioeconomic paradigm. While gender and education have received publicity from multinational organizations like the United Nations, bilateral aid organizations such as the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), and non-profit organizations that work within these two very broad arenas, relatively little of the focus has identified or discussed the surrounding social elements that affect gender and education. In the context of China, family dynamics and family planning have both exercised great influence over the fabric of Chinese society, and created strong bonds between them that have shaped the way they have developed since the Communist revolution in 1949.

In the broadest international context, China is sometimes viewed in its connection to its geographic location in East Asia, and has been grouped in with other East Asian countries by the United Nations Development Programme. It is linked with other East Asian nations in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have called for greater international attention to gender equality and universal access to education on a

worldwide scale, in addition to others. It is notable that East Asia as a geographic region has realized both of these goals in advance of the MDGs' 2015 deadline.

In 2011 the Millennium Development Goal Report indicated that since 1990, the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in tertiary education in East Asia had increased from 67:100 to 103:100 ("Millennium Development Goals Report," 2011). Nowhere is this education trend more visible than in China, where researchers have found not only that school enrollment for girls and women has increased, but also that a significant gender achievement gap between girls and boys exists in primary and secondary education (Lai, 2010). Many studies of gender and education, however, have lacked significant insight into other factors that affect individuals' lives, giving only a partial view of their experiences.

In this review of literature, I hope to provide a general overview of some of the research that has been completed in key areas of inquiry related to my research in China: gender, education, family dynamic, and family planning policies. Beyond introducing these topics, I also aim to highlight the ways in which these literatures interact with one another in order to showcase the complicated nature of these thematic areas as well as greater studies of Chinese society and culture.

The intersection points between the literatures help to illuminate some of the complexity inherent in my studies. These four key areas represent four well-researched areas of scholarship pertaining to modern China. However, often the links between these topics remain vague, or the nature of the links between them becomes complicated by various biases. In the following analysis, I hope to integrate some of the existing literatures to introduce the central themes and trends in my research outcomes, which will be discussed in the following two chapters. These works represent only a fraction of the

writing that has been produced about China, but provides compelling evidence linking gender, education, family dynamics, and family planning and the One-child policy among young Chinese women who are only children.

Gender

A great deal of research has already been completed on Chinese traditional society and women's roles therein. It is widely understood that traditional Chinese perspectives on gender roles relate closely to Confucian ideas governing the place of women in society, filial piety, son preference, and the necessity of male heirs for the continuation of ancestor worship. While most of the focus that I place in my research comes from the perspective of social science, the evolution of gender issues within China historically is best understood not as a fixed point in history with a beginning and end, but as an ongoing process that continues today.

Gender, gender roles, the evolution of women's liberation movements, and the push for gender equality have all had a long history in China. To write even a short account of the history of gender relations in China would be beyond the scope of this work, as the modern Chinese history of women's rights are complicated by ancient Chinese history. However, during several periods of modern Chinese history⁶ we can trace an evolution of ideas about the role that women played in society. Though there are many examples to note in ancient Chinese history, starting around the turn of the 20th century a greater number of accounts arose of women playing a central role in social

⁶ There is no one definition of "modern" Chinese history. For the purposes of my analysis I use the turn of the last century as a benchmark. At this time in Chinese history many different social and political revolutions were taking place, including the overthrow of the Imperial system. For more information on this period in Chinese history, see: Spence, J. D. (1981). *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: the Chinese and their revolution, 1895-1980*. New York: Viking Press.

movements, seeking out education, and taking part in revolutionary discourse with greater frequency than women in previous generations.

At these times in modern Chinese history, significant advances took place in gender equality in China. Sudo writes critically about the appearance of what may have been called “women’s rights” in China around 1900:

Although recent scholars have remarked on the appearance of the concept of ‘women’s rights’ as a milestone in the history of modern China, most of their discussions focus on the practical advancement of women’s rights, especially in the anti-footbinding movement and women’s education. ‘Women’s rights’ has thus been taken as a slogan for the women’s liberation movement; few have analysed [sic] the meaning and implications of the concept itself. Furthermore, virtually no research has been done to investigate the inter-relationships between the three concepts of ‘women’s rights’, ‘people’s/civil rights’ and ‘human rights’ (2006, p. 473).

The concept of “women’s rights” in particular, Sudo writes, appeared around 1900 (p. 475) in China, as a translation of earlier Japanese work on the subject. However, during this time the rights of women were not the only concern of many revolutionary thinkers, but an extension of revolutionary actions against the Imperial government. Rhetoric in the early 1900s centered on the idea that “people’s rights and women’s rights are closely intertwined, and once they appear, they cannot be stopped” (Jin, in Sudo 2006, p. 77). This same logic applied to the roles that women were supposed to play in encouraging the revolutionary spirit. Jin Tianhe, a revolutionary of the period, believed that “women were to fulfil their duties in enriching and strengthening the nation” (Sudo, p. 477), setting women into the role of nurturers and mothers rather than equals to men during the

era of the anti-Imperial revolution.⁷ While this may have been seen as progress, language of this kind still indicates that women had a proper place in China, and that this place was confined to the kind of traditional gendered role women had occupied for thousands of years.

The expectations placed on women during the Communist period beginning in 1949 changed dramatically. Rather than appearing as mothers of the Chinese nation, women during the Communist period were required to take a more active role in the reproduction of the nation. Dong (2013) analyzes the influence of the Communist revolution on the idea of women's liberation. Within that context, Dong writes:

Socialist China was founded on the struggles of a long, violent revolution and the establishment of impressive powers of mobilization and organization. Throughout the process, women were never accorded a clearly gendered revolutionary identity or role; neither was women's liberation ever the sole objective of women's movements. Rather, women and women's movements were always integrated into the larger context of establishing socialist ideology and practice. (Dong citing Dai, "Visible" 14, p. 94)

Because of pooling of labor on a national scale, women were considered a necessary part of the workforce, and it was understood that they would be counted among the state's assets rather than the family's (ibid.). For that reason,

⁷ The revolutionary period commonly refers to the period of time surrounding the fall of the Qing Empire and the abolition of the Imperial system in 1911. See: Spence, J. D. (1981). *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: the Chinese and their revolution, 1895-1980*. New York: Viking Press

Many researchers find the ‘women’s liberation’ achieved during the Seventeen-Year Period⁸ to be a ‘passive liberation’ or even a ‘pseudo liberation’ resulting from the state’s top-down policy rather than an intentional effort originating from women, with a distinct feminine consciousness and subjectivity. (p. 95)

In the name of revolution and social progress, women’s roles had shifted from that of reproducing the household to reproducing the state’s goals.

The actual social and political place of women during this period runs contrary to a theoretical understanding and propagation of gender equality by the Communist state, which supported equal rights under the law for women. The Chinese Constitution clearly states the equality of women and men, and includes women’s equality in spheres of politics, economics, family, society, and culture (Chinese Constitution, Art. 48).

Whether or not Chinese law and Chinese society match in their treatment of gender equality is the topic of another thesis, as I am not conducting a modern feminist critique of Chinese socialism. Likewise, China’s shortcomings in civil and human rights are not my focus. Like any other nation in the world, China is not without flaw when it comes to the rights of women, civil rights, or human rights. However, I believe that acknowledging these flaws is useful in understanding the experiences of Chinese women, including the women in my study.

Studies of Gender

In Yu, Yu and Mansfield’s study (1990), the authors describe changes in the ways households approached gender roles around the time that the One-child policy was first

⁸ In this article Dong writes of the period of time between 1949, the end of the Communist revolution, to 1966, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The events between them span seventeen years, and the author refers to this period of time as the Seventeen Year period.

enacted. They explain that traditional Chinese households have been multigenerational and patrilocal, so the expectation has been for girls to leave their natal homes, join their husband's families and help to support their in-laws in their old age. However, the expectation in contemporary China has been for all citizens under the Communist state to work for pay and have access to certain social programs in their old age. This includes the involvement of children in their parents' financial security. The purpose of their study, they explain, is to explore individuals' beliefs "in filial responsibility, behavior supporting the belief, communication patterns within the family, and satisfaction in relation to the care of elderly parents" (p. 84). They conducted this research while paying special attention to gender.

The survey they present, which was administered in 1979 at the time that the One-Child Policy was passed, indicates that a higher percentage of people believed that their parents should live with a son instead of a daughter (p. 87). Overall, the researchers found that men were more likely to think that parents should live with sons instead of daughter, and that daughters were more likely to think that parents should live with daughters instead of sons. Likewise, 61% of respondents indicated they thought their parents would prefer living with a son to a daughter, irrespective of the respondent's gender. The percentages indicate changing perspectives, but also that the traditional patrilocality was still deeply ingrained at this time.

A later study by Li and Cooney (1993) indicates that family planning policies had not weakened the effects of son preference in one region of Northeastern China they studied. Although the One-child policy had created incentives for people who abide by the policy and increased the availability of contraceptives for women and men, they

indicated that it had also led to an increase in abortion, specifically sex-selective abortion. They found that “the influence of son preference ... exists among women residing in highly urbanized areas, with better education, or in non-farmer occupations” (p. 292), not only in women from rural areas.

However, more recent studies have shown that these circumstances do not necessarily extend to modern Chinese families. Zhang’s study (2009), centered on women’s ties to their natal families, shows that state policies may have strengthened the relationships between daughters and their parents. Zhang notes that Chinese traditional society treated women as visitors in her natal homes, because she would someday be married out to other families. Large families with many sons did not need to worry that they would lack kinship ties with their families in the future because they often had sons in abundance, who would in turn bring wives in to bear a new generation of children. Zhang notes that “daughters as well as sons have become more precious to parents” (p. 272) in modern China. Because of the focus on one child, gender has become less important, and “married women are no longer considered losses” (p. 278). I will address Zhang’s work in relation to the One-child policy later in this chapter.

A comparable study published in 2009 by Loo, Luo, Presson and Li surveyed pregnant women in urban China, and determined that a majority of pregnant women (71%) preferred having a daughter over a son (p. 51). The survey found no correlation between education level and child sex preference when the survey was reduced to high school education, but when the criteria shifted to bachelor’s degree or above it revealed a slight preference for boy children. The authors speculate that the high percentage of women preferring girls might be “guarding themselves against disappointment” (p. 61),

but the surveyors were not able to get any more telling information on that line of reasoning. Despite the discrepancy in the overall survey population, the authors conclude that because a larger percentage of women with at least a bachelor's degree wanted a boy child instead of a girl child, there may still be a tie-in between social status and having a boy child.

Fong, one of few researchers who has spearheaded research endeavors encompassing multiple aspects of Chinese women's individualities, writes about the effects that single-child status has on urban girls. She finds in her study that urban girls, despite traditional gendered expectations, have taken advantage of the emotional and financial support of their parents to form identities beyond those of just "daughter" or "woman," in such a way that, in some cases, even those parents who may have been disappointed at not having a son would be proud of their daughter. In her 2002 article, Fong describes the experiences that her research uncovers about only children who are women. She writes that modern girls "have more power to challenge detrimental gender norms and use helpful ones than ever before, thanks to the decline of patriliney and the absence of brothers for their parents to favor" (p. 1098).

In her analysis of the One-child policy's effect on urban girls' educational outcomes, Fong also writes more specifically about gender. Fong is conscious of educational advantages that may be available to young women, but also notes that despite the benefits that girls may experience as a result of greater parental input and resources, women's roles in China are still overburdened, since many are still expected to work at home supporting their families as well as the workplace. Women are still expected to act in certain ways, particularly in ways that confirm women's gender stereotypes—being

“more studious and obedient” (p. 1103) than men. By conforming as feminine, they have a better chance of succeeding in work, finding a suitable husband and being able to support their parents in their old age. Liu (2006) also notes the double standards held for girls and boys. Parents of daughters indicated that “that they would like their daughters to develop some so-called manly characteristics, such as strong will, toughness, boldness, ambitiousness... but at the same time preserve some typical qualities deemed as desirable in a female” (p. 499). While there is more of a level playing field for girls and boys now, women and girls are still partially valued based on appearance and feminine grace, boys who exhibit feminine characteristics are devalued, and distinct preference is placed on masculinity over femininity within the whole of Chinese society.

While gender roles have shifted (men are willing to do more work at home, for example) and women as single children have been given greater advantages than they have in the past, this does not mean that they are not constrained to certain behaviors or mannerisms as women. Fong notes that young women have the tendency to work towards their own self-interest, and that by using some traditional traits to their advantage while eschewing others while also adopting some traditionally masculine characteristics. In this way, they pick and choose what they want out of traditional Chinese gender norms (2002, p. 1105).

The gendered dialogue that has become apparent in the historical discussion of gender roles extends beyond Chinese women as mothers of the nation, or necessary workers to be employed by the Chinese state. In the modern discussion of the One-child policy, it is important to consider gendered implications and advancement possibilities both. As Currier (2008) points out, the One-child policy “has clear gendered implications seen in the large burdens placed on women for family planning and the lack of

reproductive control granted to women” (p. 366). At the same time, however, while they may experience great burden, they may also have the opportunity for individual development, as Fong suggests in her research.

Education

Today’s education system in China has its roots in imperial times (Ross and Wang, 2010, p. 4). A cornerstone of the imperial education system was the Civil Service Examination system, which determined who would go into government service. The examinations were held at multiple levels, and individuals (men) who wished to enter service needed to go through a series of difficult tests in order to prove that they had the mental prowess and the concentration under pressure to serve the Emperor well. While the modern Chinese education system is not modeled after this tradition, the modern college entrance examination is. The college entrance examination (called *gaokao* in Chinese) focuses on rote memorization and high production within a limited period of time, and the primary goal of Chinese secondary education is to train students to perform well on the college entrance examination. The college entrance examination is a crucial step in getting into a good university, and a student who does not perform well on the exam has little opportunity to pursue higher education.

In the Imperial era, young men sitting for the civil service examination proved their knowledge of Confucianism and Daoism, as well as their dedication to serving the emperor, by writing complicated poems and essays in literary Chinese. These essays

were basically incomprehensible to a lay person⁹ because of their complex logic and use of archaic Chinese. Though the current examination system does not test students in this same way, the focus on memorization and the pressure to perform well is similar. In Imperial times it was not uncommon to hear stories of a young man's life wasted away taking and re-taking the civil service examination. In similar fashion, many modern examples exist of students who feel desperate to test well on this examination, on the first try in particular, in order to improve their chances of having a successful life. Examples of this in the Western media are particularly visible in early June during the weekend during which the college entrance examination takes place.

Scholars of Chinese secondary school students such as Fong (2004)¹⁰ and Cockain (2011)¹¹ have demonstrated through ethnographic research the increased pressure that students taking the test experience, in addition to the pressure they experience in the years leading up to the test. In Fong's study of the pressure placed on single children students in Dalian, China, she finds that while their individual lives may have been improved by their only child status, this status also carried with it negative repercussions. Fong explains that these repercussions include "diploma inflation, unrealistic expectations for children's success, fear that parents will not have enough support in old age, and widespread complaints about a rising generation of 'spoiled' singletons" (2004, p. 179). Cockain's more recent study has corroborated many of these concepts. Cockain writes,

⁹ For more information on the Imperial Examination system, see: Fairbank, John King and Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Fong conducted research on parental expectation and pressure put on secondary school students in Dalian, China. Her research was instrumental in narrowing my research focus to educational experiences of urban singletons.

¹¹ Cockain wrote on student pressure in 2011. See works cited.

My ethnographic research, like that of Vanessa Fong in Dalian, very quickly yielded accounts from Chinese students of pressure, discipline and competition. Students also described feelings of anxiety, frustration, fear, trepidation and depression which, in some cases, became expressed in physical symptoms, and blamed their trouble on excessive amounts of study and unreasonable parental expectations. (2010, p. 102)

Like Fong and Cockain, many other scholars have discussed the effects and effectiveness of the College Entrance Examination, and by extension, the secondary education system that supports it. These studies have discussed many challenges faced by modern Chinese students, including gaps in enrollment and access to higher education based on ethnicity (Chen, 2005; Clothey, 2005; Hasmath, 2008; Lang, 2010; Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2010) or gender and location (Xie, Wang and Chen, 2010).

The numbers of students seeking higher education in recent years has been another common point of research. In the years since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, the number of students seeking higher education in China has increased dramatically. According to Chen (2005), educational reform in China was espoused by Deng in order to increase the nation's economic development. He describes Deng's educational ideology as "re-orienting the relationship of the whole country with its intellectuals, researchers and teachers" (p. 46), which was crucial in the years following the Cultural Revolution,¹² a decade in which the highly educated were considered a threat to socialism. In the economic restructuring that followed, Deng implemented national

¹² Many have written on the conditions faced by intellectuals and educated people during the Cultural Revolution. Since one of the Cultural Revolution's goals was to rid the country of foreign, feudal and capitalist influence, educated people became key targets of public scrutiny. For a detailed account, see: Spence, J. D. (1990). *Deepening the Revolution. The search for modern China* (pp. 574-618). New York: Norton.

policies that made education mandatory and expanded Chinese vocational and trade schools (Chen, p. 48).

Chinese education reforms have undergone a three-stage process, with noticeable results. The first stage (1978-1984) established new educational standards to counteract some of the negative consequences of the Cultural Revolution. The second stage (1985-1992) implemented compulsory, decentralized education in local areas, holding local government responsible for the education of its citizens. The third stage (1993-1998) increased the spread of compulsory education, both intellectual and vocational (Chen, 2005, p. 48). Chen's work shows a total secondary enrollment increase between the late 1970s and early 2000s from just over 15 million to about 27.5 million students (p. 49). In a single decade Chinese higher education enrollment rates increased by nearly 27% (p. 52). Ross and Wang likewise write that, "[a]nnual higher education student enrollment increased more than fivefold from 1998 to 2009" (2010, p. 4), corroborating the increase in enrollment numbers.

However, the new focus on higher education has made the process of getting into university much more competitive. An increasing number of students each year take the college entrance examination, all seeking acceptance to a good university. The number of colleges and universities¹³ has not increased at the same rate as the number of students

¹³ Based on the interview research I completed as well as literature sources (Lai, 2010; Tsui and Rich, 2002), there are significant differences in the layout of higher education in China and the United States. Aside from the obvious economic differences such as exist between the public and private University systems in the United States, the Chinese system tiers Universities based on their quality. First, second and third tier Universities choose students based on the scores they achieve on their college entrance examination. First tier Universities are very hard to qualify for, and the score a student receives on his or her exam is the only qualification marker. After they find out their scores on the exam, students choose which Universities they would like to accept them, with the first choice usually being a first-tier school. Students do not know what score will translate into admission to a particular University (or tier of universities) because the acceptance lines for different Universities change every year. My participants

seeking entrance, meaning that the competition for spaces in universities has understandably increased. Controversy abounds surrounding the issue of which groups of people in Chinese society benefit most from this competition. Despite what may have been considered positive progress, the government and education analysts acknowledge that gaps in access persist, especially among China's ethnic minorities, groups with different kinds of household registration (such as the families of migrant workers), and between urban and rural Chinese. Despite his praise of the development of China's education system, Chen writes that "the structural challenge is a matter of educational inequality" (2005, p. 60), which gives some students more access to education than others. This is particularly true of groups in Chinese society that have traditionally experienced difficult accessing government services of all kinds. Even though the government has intervened on behalf of Chinese students who have experienced unequal access, researchers have still found that entrance policies across China (especially at the tertiary level) remain uneven (Chen, 2005, p. 62; Clothey, 2005, p. 396; Lang, 2010, p. 47-48).

Education since 1976

After the Cultural Revolution, when education was one of the many services disrupted by the political climate, the college entrance examination system was re-introduced as the primary method to assess Chinese students' educational skills. Ross and Wang (2010) explain that "the revival of the College Entrance Examination represented a return to the meritocratic ideal of 'equal opportunities' for access to higher education, at least theoretically" (3). The role of the college entrance examination was to

indicated that not knowing if they had the score to get into the University of their choice was a anxiety-inducing experience for them.

sort students into universities and colleges based on their educational merit. However, this situation has been complicated by several other factors. Notably, the increased difficulty of attaining a college degree has impacted single child families and increased the pressure placed on only children, as Fong (2004) researched. While the exams serve a sociocultural purpose – to single out the students who will achieve in higher education (Ross and Wang, 2010, p. 5), there are high expectations associated with high achievement in all levels of Chinese education, as evidenced by the existence of entrance examinations at most levels of Chinese schooling (ibid.) such as the high school entrance examination.

The impacts of gender within the Chinese higher education system has already been studied extensively, especially in the context of China's rural-urban divide. In urban China, the demographic of my research subjects, researchers have begun to study the strategies that girls employ to succeed within the educational system. The research has described situations in which girls and women have adapted to outperforming their peers (Lai, 2010), though this field has not yet been extensively studied. The existing scholarship on girls' access to education increases yearly, but questions still remain about how urban Chinese girls, who are only children in their families, think about their own education, gender equality, and their roles within their own families. While son preference has been long-studied in China, researchers have placed less emphasis (with notable exceptions, Fong, 2002, 2004; Tsui and Rich, 2010) on how urban girls, instead of being trapped by traditional gender roles into subservience, have benefited from being only children.

Chinese education, and in particular the college entrance examination, is by no means a perfect system. Changes to the current system, as Ross and Wang report, have instructed higher education institutions,

[N]ot just to select and cultivate an elite cohort of the best and brightest but also to provide education geared to the diversifying needs of ‘diverse talents.’ In turn, scholars and educators are forced to rethink the effectiveness and agility with which a highly centralized, high-stakes examination can contribute to such ends. (2010, p. 5)

It is important to note that aspects of this type of reform could include additional reforms of systems within Chinese education that have been widely criticized. Lou (2011) questions whether or not reforms that have already taken place have proved effective. Within the context of “diversifying talents,” the author questions whether the college entrance examination still makes sense, because it is the only way of gauging student ability. Luo writes, “In addition to the dichotomy between an exam-oriented and quality-oriented curriculum, students are also troubled by the dichotomy between general/academic education and relevant/practical education” (p. 73), indicating that what they are learning in schools, while useful for the entrance examination, do not prove more generally useful in life. This reflects the analysis of a common general critique of the system and exam, as related by Ross and Wang, that the college entrance examination is “a force that hinders system-wide reform, hamstringing institutional autonomy and knowledge innovation, [and] reducing schooling to a soulless competition” (2010, p. 5).

Despite controversy, however, an important question remains. If not the college entrance examination, then what else can be used to assess student readiness in preparation for University? Many of the researchers who have criticized the college entrance

examination have not reached a conclusion. Logically, if the current education system feeds directly into the college entrance examination, and is arranged and organized in such a way that it prepares students for the test, how can the system itself be refined in way that better suits the needs of a greater number of students? This remains a predominant question for both critics, proponents and reformers of the Chinese education system.

Family Dynamics

The dynamics of family life in China cannot be easily explained without understanding the intersecting contexts of the other sections of my literature review. Without understanding how gender has been shaped by Chinese history and the social changes that have occurred since the turn of the 20th century, we cannot understand the changing dynamic of women's roles within the family, and what roles women fill for their families when they are only children. We also cannot understand the context and meaning of single child status and what that means within the family without also understanding the social significance of the single child, as well as the opportunities and challenges that can be afforded an only child within the family because of their single child status. One way in which the family dynamic plays out for many single children is within the context of education—both what is expected of them by their families and what they expect of themselves.

In her 2002 article, Fong quotes the father of a young woman who has passed her college entrance examinations. To this father, the moment he finds out his daughter's score is the moment in which he finds out if the effort and care he has taken in raising his daughter and supporting her education has turned out for the best. The father and daughter find out that she has passed the college entrance examination with a high score, raising her

chances of being accepted into a top University. The father tells his daughter, ““I was wrong to have wanted a son. A daughter like you is worth ten sons”” (p. 1098). Although this particular student’s personal experience does not address the experiences of other Chinese women, particularly those who have been negatively affected by the One-child policy either personally or tangentially, this father’s praise for his daughter allows questions about gender in single-child households to be framed in a different context.

Other studies that have focused on Chinese parental expectations have shown that parents exert a great deal of influence over how their children express passed-down gendered stereotypes (Liu, 2006), unequal schooling practices in urban and rural China (Wang, 2005, p. 25), and the increasing importance of daughters as holders of family tradition (Yu, Yu, and Mansfield, 1990, p. 84). Still others have corroborated parts of Fong’s research, indicating that expectations for single girl children have risen unmistakably (Nie and Wyman, 2005; Tsui and Rich, 2002). In similar fashion, other researchers have focused on the changing attitudes of older generations towards their girl grandchildren, increasing family ties between daughters and their natal families (Zhang, 2009), and shifts in Chinese gender-based standards of acceptable behavior for girls and boys in the singleton generations (Fong, 2002; Liu, 2006).

In Liu’s (2006) research on gendered expectations, the author begins from a theoretical position stating that while they believe that trends for son preference have weakened in China overall, they have not completely disappeared (pp. 494, 501). Through a series of interviews with parents (mothers and fathers), the author finds that most parents do still expect their children to abide by traditional gender characteristics—girls should be soft and feminine, while boys should be wild and rebellious. On the other

hand, certain masculine characteristics are acceptable in girls, such as determination and studiousness, while feminine characteristics in boys are considered character flaws. The author also finds that many parents thought boys automatically more academically gifted than girls, even if that was not actually the case. They felt that parents of daughters had to be more careful in the types of activities they allowed a girl to do, and sure that they paid the proper attention to a girl's appearance, since they felt there was a correlation between appearance/vanity and intelligence (p. 501). Additionally, to many parents higher education for girls was about status and culture rather than education (p. 498).

A theme that remains consistent throughout the literature on family dynamic hone in on the pressure to succeed that has become synonymous with being an only child. Fong's research (2002; 2005) in particular hones in on this phenomenon, but is not the only work to address the issue. Studies by Cockain (2010) and Chen (2005) have targeted the pressure placed on young people who wish to perform well in the hopes of being able to support their families in the future. In Chen's analysis, which applies directly to Chinese education, the author describes how the Chinese education system is based on the soviet model, which did not focus on individual students but took a cookie-cutter approach to education (p. 56). Chen writes that "the over-burdening of students" (p. 54) has created suffering among them, and excessive stress that has even been related to physical changes like the increasing prevalence of near-sightedness—79.34% of urban senior school students at the time of the author's 2005 article were reported to be nearsighted (ibid.).

Cockain's (2010) article corroborates Fong's earlier work on senior school students, categorizing what the author describes as "accounts from Chinese students of pressure, discipline and competition. Students also described feelings of anxiety,

frustration, fear, trepidation and depression which, in some cases, became expressed in physical symptoms, and blamed their trouble on excessive amounts of study and unreasonable parental expectations” (p. 102). He goes into greater detail within the article, writing of cases that illustrate the ways in which Chinese students have experienced the pressure from their families and, more abstractly, from society at large. However, Cockain also points out an interesting trend in this research. He notes that while students engaged in the education system talk about the pressure they experience in a very negative way, they also recall their experiences in education very differently.

According to Cockain (2010), students reported hating the college entrance examination but remember their time high school fondly, even the experience of taking the exam. This trend links back to a cultural idea dating back to May 4th movement,¹⁴ by which an individual should “eat bitterness” (or have unpleasant personal experiences in order to make them a stronger person in the in the long run—similar to the saying ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’) in order to improve the lives of future generations in their family (p. 104). Even though navigating through the education system is difficult for Chinese students, and even though they both resist and comply with the educational systems they are in, students tend to view their secondary educational experiences as a good learning experience in hindsight (p. 118), one that makes them stronger and their families stronger as well. This gives them a more privileged place within the family hierarchy. As Cockain explains, “By being able to suffer—and to have this suffering acknowledged—young Chinese derive social satisfaction... this suffering gives the youth

¹⁴ Named for a series of protests held by students on May 4th, 1919, the May 4th Movement is considered the beginning of Chinese nationalism. For a full account of the May 4th Movement and its cultural and historical significance, see: Spence, J. D. (1981). *The Land of Hunger. The Gate of Heavenly Peace: the Chinese and their revolution, 1895-1980*(pp. 154-160). New York: Viking Press.

generation of today a righteous place in the streams of generations that make up Chinese society” (p. 118). Within the family unit, suffering by means of the college entrance examination is one way that young Chinese men and women can change the dynamics of their families.

The One-Child Policy

Since it was enacted in 1979, the One-child policy has acted as a lightning rod for international criticism of restrictive family planning policies. In the United States, the Congressional House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights has gone so far as to say “that the three most dangerous words in China are ‘it’s a girl’” (2011, p. 2). While there is no doubt that the One-child policy, as a piece of legislation, has flaws, this type of reasoning tends to neglect real, lived experiences of Chinese girls who *are* born. In China’s urban areas, where there is greater access to secondary and tertiary education, higher wages, a higher overall standard of living, and less deeply ingrained traditional views of gender, the statements of the Subcommittee apply less consistently. The application of the Congressional Subcommittee’s findings may represent the experiences of some Chinese women, but they do not represent the experiences of all Chinese women. In fact, there are some young women who have done more and achieved more than their male counterparts, while working within the system of patriarchy that is suggested in the House Committee document.

In the following section I will attempt to provide some of the important background information on the One-child policy. This background information is one important component that governs how the policy has been applied throughout China. Without the

proper background and contemplation of cultural and social contexts, it is impossible to gauge the policy's consequences on individuals and the whole of Chinese society.

Background of policy and history

The One-child policy (in Chinese, *jihua shengyu zhengce*, or “family planning policy”) had far-reaching original intentions. The policy was an effort at population control and economic development, one intended to decrease human impact upon the national resources and environment as well as increase a family's income over time (Currier, 2008; Fong, 2002, 2004; Greenhalgh, 1986, 1994, 2005). The policy traces its roots in the Communist era back to 1953, when the Chinese Ministry of Health passed the “Regulation of Contraception and Induced Abortions” legislation (Wang, 2012, p. 563) because of links the Ministry understood to exist between high fertility and restrictions for women. At the time when the Communist revolution ended in 1949, the government was decidedly pro-natalist, and individuals had limited access to abortion and contraception. At that time, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in China was 6.14 births per woman (ibid.).

In the years leading up to the One-child policy's introduction, the government employed other strategies with “the goal of emancipating women from the burdens of high fertility” (Wang, 2012, p. 563), particularly through contraception. The first official family planning program began in 1973 (ibid.; Greenhalgh, 1994), and was called the ‘*wan, xi, shao*’ program. The name indicates the situations in which families should consider having children. ‘*Wan*’ means late, indicating a family should wait until an older age to start having children. ‘*Xi*’ means evenly spaced, indicating they should wait more years in between having children. Finally, ‘*shao*’ means few, implying that the

overall number of children per family should decrease (Wang 2012; Greenhalgh 1994).

The efforts at population reduction in the 1970s proved effective. In the decade prior to the One-child policy, China's TFR dropped to 2.92 births per woman (Wang, 2012, p. 566).

However, Wang writes that, "by 1979, there was a growing concern about China's 'carrying capacity,' the ability of its land, water and other resources to support a population which had grown from 500 million in 1950 to 1 billion. The solution to this problem was sought in the one-child policy" (p. 564). Though the efforts of earlier plans had effectively controlled the population to some extent, these plans did not go far enough in the eyes of family planning officials. In the end, officials decided that *Wan, xi, shao* would not be enough to slow the devastation of China's rapidly increasing population (p. 565), and that more drastic measures would be sought through the more severe One-child policy.

A primary critique of the One-child policy has centered on its reliance on harsh, invasive or coercive birth control methods in order to meet the needs of the state. To critics of the policy, the government's insistence on controlling the fertility and reproductive choices of Chinese families (particularly Chinese women) constitutes an attack on personal freedoms and basic human rights. This is the perspective taken by the U.S. Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights (2011), which I will address again in Chapter IV. The One-child policy's focus on population control has also raised red flags for social scientists who study demography, reproduction, and the politicization of bodies.

Anthropologists such as Greenhalgh (1994, 2003, 2005) have traced substantial links between the One-child policy and Malthusian or neo-Malthusian thinking about population

control.¹⁵ It is important that these links not be disregarded, particularly in light of the relationship between the One-child policy, economic development, and environmental protection. Fong (2004) writes about the links between population reduction and economic development, specifically the fertility transition that is expected to go along with economic development. She writes, “China’s one-child policy is based on the principle that it is easier to modernize a smaller group—whether it be a family or a nation—than a larger group. The fewer people there are, the more resources there will be for each person” (pp. 69-70). In the case of China’s cities, smaller family sizes would mean that families had adopted more modern economic values that accompany low child mortality rates, access to education, and higher consumption overall (p. 75).

Several key themes run through the literature about the One-child policy, and most analyses tend to take a political side in their policy analysis. Researchers such as Greenhalgh (1986, 1994, 2001, 2003, 2005), Wang (2012) and Zhao (1997) who have studied the policy’s development and history tend to point out the incongruence between the policy and Chinese society and culture, though not necessarily for the same reasons. Other researchers like Shen (1998) and Xiao and Zhao (1997) present more favorable views of the policy, usually by claiming that the economic success China has experienced has been a direct result of the policy, and that the demographic challenges China will face in the future are small in comparison to the greater good that population reduction has done.

As one of the policy’s most accomplished researchers (and critics), much of Greenhalgh’s work (1986; 1994; 2001; 2003; 2005; 2006), points out that popular

¹⁵ As Fong (2004) describes, the core of Malthus’ ideology centered on the link between high population, poverty and hunger. In reality, Mao Zedong’s call to Chinese people to control the population was not phrased as a way to reduce hunger at all, as Mao considered Malthus’ ideas contrary to socialism because it presupposed a class hierarchy that Mao did not support (70).

resistance to the policy in rural areas created significant enough backlash that the central government called for portions of the policy to be reviewed and changed. The evolution of Greenhalgh's argument across pieces is particularly captivating. In her selection from 1986 she seems hopeful that additions made to the policy in the mid-1980s would make the one-child policy more culturally appropriate and have positive impacts on people's lives. Her 1994 article presents a middle ground approach to the policy. She clearly links the policy to neo-Malthusianism ideas about population control, expresses the exasperation of rural Chinese who wish to have more than their allotted children, and points out the inconsistent application of contraceptives based on the sex of children. At the same time, however, she points to individual agency and resistance, as well as officials' complicity with breaking the One-child policy's rules.

Greenhalgh's later work (2003, 2005) takes a different tone than her earlier work. She details the role of science in the problematization of population growth (2005), and the role biopolitics it would later employ. She writes, "the case of population policy is important because it provides rare insight into the way scientists have sometimes shaped elite policy-making and because the social and political consequences of the one-child policy have been so troubling" (p. 253). Though she occasionally uses strong language in her earlier articles, because she writes assertively and addresses research she has completed through several decades, this represents a departure from simple policy analysis to encompass a much larger conversation about politics, power, agency and militarism.

Wang's (2012) article joins Greenhalgh's (1986) in its suspicion of changes in tone that surround the One-child policy. After 1994,¹⁶ "the Chinese government made

¹⁶ 1994 was the year of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, which the author notes in the article.

commitments to the promotion of women's reproductive health" (p. 567), which had not been a part of earlier policy rhetoric. This relates back to Wang's analysis of early reproductive technology use before the One-child policy was enacted, when the Communist government started encouraging birth control measures under the auspices of women's empowerment (p. 563).

Zhao's analysis of 1982 fertility survey statistics throws many popular stereotypes about Chinese society on their heads, by refuting the idea that Chinese families did not, nor did they care to, limit their fertility before the 1970s (1997). On the contrary, Zhao finds that,

In the 1970s, when the majority of the population realized that mortality decline had greatly reduced the need for a large number of children to ensure the continuation of the family line, and that having many children could bring about more difficulties for the country as well as for their own families, the call to family planning by and large elicited a popular response. (p. 753)

Contrary to popular beliefs about rural Chinese (even beliefs of other Chinese people), Zhao finds that Chinese fertility rates in marriage was much lower before the 1970s than they had been in European nations during similar periods of industrialization and development (5.61 children per woman in China vs. 9.83 children per woman in Belgium and 8.48 children per woman in France)(p. 756). This type of high fertility in developed nations undermines the neo-Malthusian idea checks on population growth in are inevitable, and their application to China (p. 758). While Zhao does not take a strong stand for or against the One-child policy itself, he does urge the reader to be cautious

when determining what the policy may or may not have accomplished and consider what role Chinese traditions may have had in promoting low fertility rates.

Taking a very different political and social perspective are Shen (1998) and Xiao and Zhao (1997), who both support the policy because of the positive economic effects it has had on Chinese society. Shen credits the policy with reducing fertility to below replacement by the early 1990s, which has been the driving force behind Chinese modernization and environmentalism (p. 32). Xiao and Zhao maintain that the family planning policy's purpose is to improve quality of life for all of China, and that the focus on reproductive health is integral to the policy's application (p. 59). This use of language indicates the incorporation of a rights-based discourse into family planning. By framing the One-child policy as a means to furthering a basic human right, Xiao and Zhao can soften the policy's image. Both of these articles focus on the power of economic transformation, the necessity of lessening China's impact on the environment, and fertility control as a positive check against the Chinese "population bomb."

One-Child Policy: Good or Bad?

Studies of the One-child policy have not come to any common consensus about the policy's merits or the lack thereof within Chinese society. Nie and Wyman (2005) noticed a politically charged acceptance of the policy among older residents of Shanghai that they interviewed. They attributed this acceptance to either fear based on what their families had experienced during the Cultural Revolution, fear that the state would punish them for non-compliance, or fear of overpopulation and food shortage that related to personal experiences during periods of famine in the early 1960s.

Nie and Wyman found that for the younger generation, being an only child was just a reality of life, and that many children formed sibling-like bonds with classmates or other family members. Single children have “gradually internalized the one-child policy as part of their culture” (p. 325). Although young parents who were then both single children had the option of having a second child, many preferred not to. The younger generation tended to blame outer regions of cities or more remote areas for driving up fertility rates because they believed that people living in cities were more modern. Likewise, some young people believe that the policy should remain in effect in order to control the population that lives outside the city, who they believe do not know about contraception or should not reproduce for reasons of class. The authors believe that the nature of Shanghai has made procreation less of a priority for the younger generation, particularly women, and a small percentage of women report that they would prefer having a girl child to a boy. They report also that the policy supports a “level playing field” by forcing them “to endow their singleton, male or female, with whatever funds and aspirations they have for the next generation” (p. 329).

Fong likewise discusses the benefits that young Chinese women may experience as a result of their single-child status. She explains that, though Chinese women in previous generations “were severely hindered by a patrilineal system that overwhelmingly favored sons at the expense of their sisters” (2002, p. 1105), today’s single children who are girls experience great benefits. Currier (2008) also notes the gains experienced by young women:

With less draconian enforcement, there are some unexpected economic gains related to the One Child Policy experienced by young women, most notably in the

urban setting. Some of these changes include increases in educational opportunities for women and greater or more equal value assigned to women as workers... However, the effects of the policy have been uneven and while things may be getting better for some urban women the same does not necessarily hold true for rural women. (p. 366)

In the end, Liu encourages caution. While it may be true that one group of Chinese women experiences benefits at the hands of the One-child policy, this does not necessarily mean that all women across China have experienced these same benefits.

It is noteworthy that as Chinese families shift, Chinese culture and society likewise continues to change. Throughout the literature on Chinese families, and extending beyond to the other literatures that relate to my research, one thing that remains consistent in the lives of Chinese only children, women and girls is the shifting of perspective. Today's young Chinese women experience a remarkably different China than their mothers and grandmothers did. In addition to changing social and cultural climates, young Chinese singletons now face the policy change by which married couples may have more reproductive options, including having a second child if one or both of them are single children themselves (Olesen, 2012; Lu, 2013). This entire generation of urban single children, who grew up in a society in which no one had siblings, may be the last. The time to investigate their educational experiences is now, while they are still engaged in their education, and before generations of Chinese students with siblings begin to re-emerge.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF TRENDS

As I wrote in Chapter I, I conducted my research by completing in-depth interviews with Chinese international students at the University of Oregon. My potential demographic group was understandably large, as the Chinese international student population at the University of Oregon continues to grow each year. When I submitted my research proposal in 2013, the number of Chinese international students currently enrolled at the university (both undergraduate and graduate) was 1,489 (S. Clark, personal communication, Feb. 7, 2013), but specific demographic information about this group of students was not available to me such as gender, age, home city/town, etc. In all but two cases, the students I interviewed belonged to the demographic categories I had identified. Following is a listing of these criteria:

- Student at the University of Oregon
- Chinese International Student
- Female, woman identified
- Age 18-28
- Only child
- City of origin population greater than one million
- Graduated high school in China
- Mixed socioeconomic status (SES)

In my final group of participants, every participant met six of eight criteria. Two came from cities of less than one million people, and one participant was not an only child.

Though not every participant came from identical family situations, most of them had key similarities. Table 1 shows simple demographic data I compiled about these individuals. While I initially screened my participants based on key factors such as single child status and size of home city, I found myself wondering throughout my interviews about the experiences of some slightly or significantly outside my demographic group. My decision to add one participant who had an older sister was strategic; I hoped through her responses that I could better understand the two sides of a many-sided situation. Additionally, I realized that my insistence on interviewing only those who fit exactly my demographic criteria ran contrary to my theoretical posturing about the validity and importance of individual experiences.

Table 1: Study Participants

Inter-viewee	Age	Only Child or Sibling	Level at University	Size of Home City	Country of High School Graduation	Family SES	Case Study
1	24	Only	Graduate	800,000	China	Mid	Yes
2	28	Only	Graduate	>1 million	China	Mid	No
3	19	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	No
4	27	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	Yes
5	23	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	No
6	20	Only	Exchange	>1 million	China	Mid	No
7	23	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	Yes
8	19	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	No
9	21	Sibling	Exchange	20,000	China	Mid	Yes
10	21	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	No
11	22	Only	Undergrad	>1 million	China	Mid	No

Similarities

Many of the similar traits and characteristics that I tracked among my participants come from powerful narratives describing group traits based on the four different areas of focus gender, education, single child status, and family dynamic. These are narratives wrapped up in culture, ethnicity and class, as well as any number of other social groups, and they tell a story about what it means to be Chinese within different contexts.

However, many of these narratives seek to identify and, further, define individuals based on their adherence to group characteristics. Defining individuals in this way not only removes their agency but turns their identity into a method for perpetuating stereotypes and generalizations about certain types of people.

This can easily be seen in the media narrative that has sprung up around Chinese children. A clear narrative has been written by the Western media about what a Chinese only child is like, a narrative about what it means to live in China, a narrative about what it means to be a Chinese woman, and most broadly, a narrative about what it means to be Chinese. In current media discourse, this narrative is commonly expressed through the lens of education, as parental influence and gender intersect with the education of only children quite handily. Before I address the shared experiences of my own research participants, I would like to share the media's narrative representation of these groups, and how, as an outsider, these narratives may be perceived.

Generalization: All Chinese children are only children

In a Times article in 2013, journalist Jeffrey Kluger wrote that, “Just 27% of those born in China in 1975 were only children; in 1983, it was 91%” (2013). The author does not present a statistic beyond 1983, neither does he mention policy exceptions already in place from the policy’s inception, such as for minority groups, or those introduced in the years since. He also does not explain the origin of these statistics, or address the fact that if nearly 7% of the Chinese population according to the 1982 Census belonged to ethnic minority groups (Basic Statistics on National Population Census in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990 and 2000 - China Statistics Census), which means that according to this statistic only 2% of all Chinese children born in that year were born into families with siblings. By comparison, Xinhua News Agency recently reported that only children account for about 37.5% of Chinese families (Lu, 2013). The difference between these two statistics is striking.

Generalization: Only children are spoiled

Only children have received harsh judgment in the West for many decades. In a 1998 article from The New York Times Magazine, contributor Bill McKibben writes of research conducted in the late 19th century about socialization skills among children. He cites the Psychologist and Educator G. Stanley Hall, saying that “being an only child was ‘a disease in itself’” (McKibben 1998). McKibben continues to detail the generational differences in how only children are viewed. Many of the cultural beliefs about what it means to be an only child in the United States are rooted in the research McKibben cites, and are also the basis for how the American media writes about only children in China.

As in the United States, reputable research has not widely addressed the only-child phenomenon in China, yet beliefs about what it means to be an only child abound. Chinese only children are labeled as selfish, greedy, and self-important. Boys who grow up as only children in urban China often receive the label “Little Emperor.” Kluger’s 2013 article on the “Little Emperor” phenomenon indicates that this issue remains prevalent in Western understanding of the One-child policy. In his article he writes,

For years now, Chinese parents and teachers have lamented what’s known as the *xiao huangdi* – or little emperor – phenomenon, a generation of pampered and entitled children who believe they sit at the center of the social universe because that’s exactly how they’ve been treated. (2013)

The Los Angeles Times, likewise, published an article stating that, “As the “Little Emperors” grew from toddlerhood to adolescence, studies largely failed to document what grandparents, teachers and eventually employers would come to believe with absolute conviction: that the sons and daughters of the one-child policy were spoiled, selfish and lazy” (Healy, 2013). These articles, both written in 2013, address the issue of selfishness among only children based on the findings of a research project conducted by Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan and Meng, published in 2013. The study addresses the behavior of only children, and claims that the One-child policy “has produced significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic and less conscientious individuals” (abstract), based on economics-centered surveys. The authors’ choice to interpret the outlooks and experiences of Chinese single children through this type of quantitative research, which does not address the individuals’ lives themselves, makes broad assumptions based on narrow data.

This narrative of selfish, spoiled only children has dominated the Western media. That these articles continue to be written and circulated in the American media has repercussions on how Americans (and others in the West) understand China. However, its grounding lies in supposition and generalization rather than careful study.

Generalization: When they receive education, only children are pressured by their parents to succeed much more than those who have siblings

In the narrative about Chinese only children, there is a great focus on education and its links to economic development. This is evident in both media and social science research about China. On a larger scale, there is an international focus on education that links it with modernization and social and economic development. This can be seen internationally in the Millennium Development Goals. The United Nations General Assembly wrote in its “Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration” that, “Education provides the skills that can lift families out of extreme poverty and preserve community health. In particular, when society facilitates girls’ empowerment through education, the eventual impact on their and their families’ daily lives is unequalled” (United Nations General Assembly, 2001). In China, where the One-child policy was instated in order to achieve significant demographic change as well as modernization, education has become both a catalyst and a measure by which families gauge their future potential. In households that only have one child, this increases the value of educating that child. This has been an important part of many individual stories, and indicated shifting cultural perspectives.

The translation of improved access to education in China gets filtered through the American media as a generalization about what Chinese lives are like. The narrative, which is supported by both the media and a great deal of social science research, describes that all Chinese children have been raised by their parents to believe that education is the silver bullet that will create a better living condition for their family. If they cannot succeed in education, they will be doomed to a substandard life and their families will suffer because there will not appropriate return on investment.

Generalization: Chinese girls have added pressure because son preference means that Chinese families are disappointed when they have a girl

This narrative perspective is corroborated in the United States by the stories that have been published about horrific experiences that women have endured at the hands of severe Chinese family planning officials. In the first testimony before of the U.S. Congressional Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights in a 2011 hearing, a Chinese woman named Ji Yeqing tells the horrific story of two abortions she had been coerced into by the government, one through physical force (“China's one-child policy the government's massive crime against women and unborn babies”). She speaks in her story about her in-laws’ desire to have a grandson and links her family planning decisions to her in-laws’ son preference. She frames her experiences with family planning and coercive policies around the disappointment her extended family experienced when her first child was a girl. After relating her experiences with government coercion, forced abortion, and invasive birth control, she concludes by relating how she came to live in the United States. She does not mention her daughter

again, since the focus of the testimony was on her unborn children rather than the child she already had.

This is one example of many that color the perspectives of what it means to be a girl in China, a perspective that in the United States has been less than flattering to Chinese families and Chinese culture. The women lending their perspective to this particular hearing focused on their own lived experiences, while Chairman of the Subcommittee Hon. Christopher H. Smith chose to interpret their lives:

Today in China, rather than being given maternal care, pregnant women, without birth-allowed permits, are hunted down and forcibly aborted. They are mocked, belittled, and humiliated. There are no single moms in China, except those who somehow evade the family planning cadres and conceal their pregnancy. For other three decades, brothers and sisters have been illegal; a mother has absolutely no right to protect her unborn baby from state-sponsored violence (ibid., p. 1).

From this statement it is clear that Smith's interpretation marks these particular women's experiences as representative of all Chinese women girls, and that systematic gender-based violence is based on son preference. As he notes later in his introductory remarks, "the three most dangerous words in China are 'It's a girl'" (ibid., p. 2).

Generalization: The Chinese education system allows no room for innovation or individuality. Students hate being in school, and school removes their ability to think for themselves

The narrative of Chinese education in the West focuses attention on the lack of individual expression and reliance on memorization. It also focuses on the importance of

the college entrance examination, and the consequences that memorization has for students who seek alternative educational opportunities like studying abroad. The New York Times published an article in 2012 about Chinese students' test-taking abilities, linking the focus on memorization and test-taking strategies in Chinese students only to their ability to test well in particular topics, not understand these topics (McDonald, 2012). The ability to memorize extends beyond the Chinese education system, as they seek to use these skills to tackle other situations (in the case of this article, language learning) using similar methods that do not have the same practical results.

Likewise, an article in the Guardian in 2014 focused on discrepancies between Chinese education and the more nurturing, individualist system in the United Kingdom (Kaiman, 2014; online). Kaiman quotes Lao Kaisheng, a professor of education at Beijing Normal University, who says, ““The education system here puts a heavy emphasis on rote memorization, which is great for students' test-taking ability but not for their problem-solving and leadership abilities or their interpersonal skills”” (ibid.). While test-taking ability and scores make Chinese students more attractive candidates, both in China and abroad (ibid.; McDonald 2012), they do not promote individuality and well-rounded learning.

While certainly not the only generalizations in circulation about China, the perceptions that evolve based on these narratives of the lives and experiences of Chinese people, only children, students, family members, and members of society paint a vivid picture to an American audience. However, I will posit through my research findings this narrative of similarity and generalization constitutes a massive erasure of individual experience. At the surface level, it may appear as though many of the participants in my

study fit neatly into the consigned roles that the media has narrated for them, but while similarities between them, and between their lives and the “standard” experience, may at times be numerous, they express their lived experiences in very different ways and demonstrate key diversions from the trends.

Research Trends

The participants I interviewed represented a diverse group within the demographic parameters that I established, with the exception of the two I mentioned previously. Despite their diversity, their interviews illuminated points of similarity between their experiences. After data collection I compiled their answers and coded them based on the general themes outlined in Chapter II (gender, education, family dynamic, and the One-child policy). I compiled data into a spreadsheet that identified 121 possible points of similarity between participant experiences. Not every interview I conducted touched on every point. On average, participants provided responses for over two-thirds of the total number of 121 points of similarity.

The trends of particular interest that I tracked relate to the following questions:

- Have your parents or extended family ever stated a preference for boys or girls?
- Do you feel like girls experience any academic disadvantage because of gender?
- Do you think girls experience special expectations from their families or society?
- Do you plan to get married in the future, and if so, will you have children? How many?
- Did you complete the college entrance examination, and did the score matter for the future?

- What track of courses did you study (science or social science)?
- Did teachers' treatment of students depend on scores?
- Were there more boys or girls in your classroom?
- Did your high school rank students? If so, was it public or private?
- When you were in high school, did you experience pressure to succeed and from whom?
- Do you have internal or external desire to return to China to take care of your family?
- Do you have internal or external desire to return to China to raise a family?
- Did your parents support your decision to study in the United States?
- Growing up, did you know people who had siblings?
- Did you ever want to have siblings? If so, brother or sister? Younger or older?
- Did your parents ever talk to you about wanting to have other children?
- What do you think of only children in general?
- Do you think that the One-child policy was an effective means of population control?
- Do you think that it had positive or negative consequences on Chinese society?
- Has the policy affected you personally, either directly or indirectly?

Additionally, I tracked through the interviews particular instances of language that indicated how my participants felt about certain subjects, specifically gender. While gender itself was not an issue that many of them wished to discuss in detail, the language

that they used when speaking about gender roles and expectations of women was particularly interesting. I will continue to discuss this trend throughout this chapter.

From my participants I chose four of eleven to highlight as case studies, primarily for the fact that while they each fit into the trends of similarity in certain ways, each also broke with similarity and presented challenges to trends. Before I introduce these cases, I will first highlight the collective similarities among the data based on the above set of questions.

Gender

During my interviews, gender was the most difficult social marker to track. Participants had the tendency to glance over gender as if their gender had not made a difference in their lives, while simultaneously expressing their beliefs about gender in more subtle, nuanced ways. In many of the participants these beliefs tended to support traditionally held assumptions about gender binaries, gender roles, and heteronormativity.

In terms of the general statistics, all participants indicated that their gender was not a determining factor in their relationships with their parents, and said that their parents had never expressed a preference to them for boy children over girl children. This was not always the case with extended family, however. Three participants expressed that gender was a problem for their grandparents, and that the fact that they were girls had been a hindrance to their relationships with these family members. Nine of eleven participants expressed that girls do not experience any academic disadvantage because of gender, while only one of the remaining two participants expressly stated that girls experienced educational disadvantage.

Ten of eleven participants responded that they feel as though their families or society places different expectations on them because they are women. Some of these expectations related to dress or hair length (Y. Peng, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013; N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013); others mentioned that their parents encouraged them not to stay out late at night, go to parties, drink alcohol, or have romantic relationships (J. Li, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013; H. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2013; Y. Peng, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013; N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013; F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 22, 2013; L. Tao, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2013). However, their parents also expected them to one day get married and provide grandchildren. Ten of eleven reported they planned to get married in the future. The final respondent indicated that while she did not plan to get married, she would do so if the time was right and if she found the right husband. This same interviewee (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) said that she would only have children if she were married, whereas the remaining ten all indicated that they intended to have children. Six of the eleven total said they would prefer having more than one child. One additional participant (N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013) said her decision to have one or more than one children rested on her mother—regardless of how many children she wanted, if her mother wanted her to have more than one she would comply with her mother's wishes.

Many participants noted at one time or other during their interviews that gender was not something that mattered too much personally, within the education system, or within their families. However, most interviewees indicated at one point or another through their answers their compliance with certain patriarchal expectations of gender or

adherence to traditional gender roles. Some of the answers that indicated compliance were explicit and some implicit.

In her interview, Ying (Oct. 24, 2013), a 24 year-old graduate student, explained what had happened when her parents tried to set her up with a co-worker's son, who also happened to live in the United States. Despite the fact that she did not particularly want her mother to play matchmaker, she agreed to contact him. After a series of unfortunate exchanges in which the man expressed no interest in getting to know her, Ying expressed her frustration:

I kept talking to him because my mom said "don't be cold," and I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I should at least try a little bit. [When] I talked to him a second time, he said he was playing games; I said fine, I tried asking him what kind of games he played. I don't really care what kind of games he play[s]... but he replied to me after ten minutes of fifteen minutes in a short sentence. [After] another ten minutes, I thought "you're not really interested." So I just talked to my mom, "mom, this is not working. I tried, but this person doesn't want to talk to me." Um, my mom said, "oh, alright, maybe it's because he figured you are probably taller than him." (Y. Sun, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013)

Although she did not necessarily care to contact the man in the first place, Ying made the conscious decision to follow her mother's relationship advice. Her mother's explanation of his disinterest related to physical incompatibility in her mind, as Ying is quite tall and her height must have been the problem. While Ying laughed at this explanation, she did not indicate that she thought this conclusion was incorrect.

During Huiru's interview (H. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2013), I asked her about some of her experiences in boarding school. She explained that in her school sometimes the instructors went a little easier on the girls than the boys, especially in the science classes. At the same time, however, she thought that the girls had a much easier time keeping their dorm rooms tidy because many of them probably cleaned things at home whereas boys had no experience cleaning at home.

Xiuying (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013) told me that she considered it a natural phenomenon that more boys should excel in math and science in high school, because boys and girls naturally like different subjects. Girls like literature and art, and boys like science. She expressed this not in terms of there being more pressure in school for boys to study science and girls to study literature, but more in terms of what should be studied based on gender. This idea that boys would or should excel in the sciences was shared among several interviewees.

When Fang (F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013) talked about her high school experiences, she said that as a student in the literature track there were many girls in her class and not many boys. When she came to the United States as an exchange student, she noticed that her classes more often had equal numbers of girls and boys, and that she preferred this. However, she also noted the reasons why she prefers a mixed classroom. She explained, "[there were] too many girls. Because girls [are] kind of... sometimes they will have-- not fight[s], just no, like, harmony" (ibid.). Although Fang expressed her dissatisfaction with her classrooms being predominantly women, her reasoning is motivated by a very traditional Chinese mindset that harmony is difficult to accomplish among a group of women.

One of the final students I interviewed had more explicit things to say than many of my participants about gender. While she acknowledged the double standards that exist in society for men and women, she also did not see these double standards as harmful to either men or women (X. Huang, personal communication, Nov 22, 2013). Xiaolian, a 21 year-old from a large city, comes from a “traditional” family in the sense that her father and his siblings remained very filial to their father and traveled great distances at high cost to care for him before his death. She expressed to me that she thinks that there are expectations of what she should do as a woman, but that these expectations exist to protect her. The reasoning she provides for this is simple to her: “No woman will rape boys, right?”

To Xiaolian this is the most significant difference between men and women, and boys and girls, and the reason why the expectations differ. Women are physically and mentally weaker than men, according to her, so girls and women will always want someone (a man) to protect them. She discusses this further by drawing on the example of her boyfriend. She explained that her boyfriend feels pressure to be strong and not exhibit any weaknesses, and also expresses that this presentation of traditional masculinity is difficult. She explains,

He said that he wanted to be the person to support the family and be strong, I mean I could tell he has the feeling like that... But [he] has to. I think for my husband, you have to be strong. I don't want a weak husband... No women wants, right? I mean, it's not even about China, it's all the world... maybe some [prefer to be] really equal, but I think most of the women they don't want to, like, have a boyfriend or husband that's actually weaker than [them].

Xiaolian in this way not only admits that gender roles exist, but she expresses her complicity in reproducing ideas about traditional masculinity and femininity, and her internalization of masculine and feminine roles, in her own relationships.

Education

All of the participants in the study shared their personal experiences as students in the Chinese education system. While their individual experiences varied in markedly significant ways, common themes developed surrounding the educational systems in which they studied. Several of these common themes dealt with the courses of study they chose, the makeup of classrooms, and the classroom environment.

Of the interview participants, ten of eleven attended public school¹⁷ and eight of eleven took the college entrance examinations after completing their third year of high school. The three who did not complete the college entrance examination (J. Li, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013; N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013; X. Huang, personal communication, Nov. 22, 2013) all knew that they would be going to college in the United States, eliminating the need to take the college entrance examination. Of the eight who took the exam, five responded that their scores were the primary determinant of whether or not they went to college in China; the additional three had either already been admitted to university in China (X. Wu, personal communication,

¹⁷ As one of my participants noted (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013), private schools in China are considered inferior to public schools. As a private school student, she had been unable to test high enough on the high school entrance examinations to attend a public high school in her home city.

Nov. 1, 2013), or had been admitted to an American university (H. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2013; L. Tao, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2013).

Among the participants, seven of eleven studied art, literature or social science as a specialization in high school (*wenke*, which translates as ‘culture’ or ‘social science’ studies, and includes courses such as literature, art, geography, and history). Two of the eleven studied science in high school (*like*, ‘science’ studies, including biology and chemistry).¹⁸ The two remaining had special circumstances in high school—one attended a private school (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) and the other attended a school that did not differentiate between classes in the same way as standard schools, but only for the years that she was in high school (Y. Peng, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013). All but one student in art/social science confirmed that there were more girls in their classes than boys, while both students in the science track said that their class was mostly boys.

All participants reported that the teachers in their classes treated students well depending on their scores, not depending on other factors such as gender. However, the classroom structure was sometimes difficult for students to handle. Nine of eleven participants indicated that their high schools ranked students, and that they had the chance to know their rank among their peers on a regular basis. However, in some of these schools ranking was private. In six of nine, however, rankings were made publicly. Some students indicated that this process was stressful for them whereas others mentioned that the greatest stress only got put on those who tested among the top in their class.

¹⁸ All students in high school have four subjects in common: Chinese, English, Math and Physics. Students study an additional two subjects in the second and third years of high school, which are chosen based on their abilities and preference for arts/social sciences or laboratory sciences. Generally speaking, the science classes in Chinese high schools are ranked more highly than the social science classes. The students in a particular grade are ranked and sorted into classes based on their rank in the whole grade.

Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013), who was in the middle of finishing her final term of college, and who had taken several years off of school in between high school and coming to college in the United States, had a great deal to share about the pressure that the education system places on individuals, pressure that she also experienced in her life. She explained,

I don't know the reason, but if you are a student... [and] you are not good at studying, then the people around you will consider you are... very bad, you know... They [will] not judge people based on their virtue or based on their behavior, they just base [it] on their score. This [is a] really strange, um, system... but it's still very high influence [on] the Chinese student. From very small you will be asked to study very well, memorize all the stuff, just [be] a study machine.

The individual discrimination that she experienced aside, her words represent more than just her own experiences, but the experiences of others as well.

Many participants spoke about competition and ranking systems in their high schools. Jing (J. Li, personal communication, Nov. 11, 2013) shared that the public school she had attended had taken ranking very seriously. Not only did they post rankings in the school, but the school administration communicated student rankings within their grade to their parents on a regular basis. Another participant (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2013) described her experiences conforming based on the pressure surrounding her. She cited the example of extra weekend study classes or cram classes, which she finally decided to attend so that she could do well on the college entrance exam.

During her interview, Xiuying (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013) shared her opinions on the college entrance examination and the competition that it creates among prospective students. She shared that even though studying in high school was difficult, everyone's goals were similar, and having one method to measure success and failure was likely the only way to do things in China. She shared, "According to my experience, and friends and classmates in university, everyone has good competition when they graduate from university. Most of them have strong ability to face competition when they graduate from university." Not all students may agree with her assessment, but the general experiences of my participants do express this theme, judging from how many of their scores on the college entrance examination had practical application or were necessary for reaching their future goals.

Family Dynamics

The study participants came from diverse backgrounds and different types of families. Some considered their families very modern, others more traditional. Some participants spoke of how tradition factored into their relationships with their extended families, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. For some of these, point of origin sometimes played a factor. However, when asked about their own futures, several of them had to think hard about their decisions about returning to China, and under what conditions they planned to do so. Many participants likewise presented personal insights into the pressure to succeed that they experienced, and where that pressure came from.

The pressure to succeed in high school is one aspect of Chinese education that has been widely considered from media and social science perspectives. Among my

participants, ten of eleven indicated that they felt pressure to succeed in school, and of these ten all indicated that they felt this pressure internally. Six of the participants also reported feeling pressure to succeed from family members in one way or another, though how this manifested varied from case to case. Of these six, only a few indicated that this pressure was extreme (S. Ying, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013; X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013). However, all eleven reported that they had known others who had experienced extreme or severe parental pressure to perform well in school.

Among the students I interviewed, all indicated that their parents supported their decision to come to the United States for study. However, several noted that they had a drive to return to China to either marry and raise a family or take care of their family in the future. Seven of eleven respondents reported that they intended to return to China for the sake of their families (specifically their parents), while six of eleven maintained that they would like to return when the time came to have their own family.

Xiulan (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2013) comes from a family of artists in Southern China, and her experiences dealing with internal pressure have been complicated by her family's pessimism about the education system. As she told me,

[I]f I just want to express my... frustration about learning... the only the only person that I can talk to about this is my parents... [C]an you imagine that you live in an environment and-- and everyone [is] just doing their own thing? Like, everyone just... [has] their own goals. And they're really working hard [people], but no one will care about, no one will help you. And, [if] at that time you're not the best student, you're just at the middle level, [can] you imagine... the internal pressure and like external pressure?

While Xiulan shared that she did not feel pressure to do well from her parents, she did feel it from herself. She identifies feeling compelled to conform to the educational system in which she had been raised, saying, “everyone just [tells you,] ‘as you're a student, you have to have good grades, and then... that's why you can go to a really good school, university,’ or something. ... I would say this is a routine, a special routine in China.”

The routine of which she speaks is something that other participants mentioned as well, something that has created some intense internal pressure. Ying (Y. Sun, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013) discussed her experiences with this phenomenon. She described, “For me I think the only way to change my own fate was to study, to get into a good university and hopefully learn something, and hopefully get a job after that... I can't depend on my parents, like, forever, so that's why I thought I should study hard in school.” In her school, teachers encouraged her to consider how much pressure she put on herself, rather than how much she experienced externally. Although Ying does say she experienced pressure from her parents to succeed, she focuses on her own drive to succeed and how it has shaped her experiences.

The pressure that Na (N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013) experienced was both internal and external, stemming from another family member's educational prowess. While her parents insist that she has never been compared to her cousin, who has a Master's degree from Cambridge University, Na feels it anyway and believes that it comes from within and from without. Her parents insist that they only want her to be happy, just as Min, Xiulan and Xiaolian's (X. Huang, personal communication, Nov. 22, 2013) parents all do; but she still feels the internal pressure because she fears she cannot be as good as her cousin.

One-Child Policy

While ten of the eleven participants I interviewed were only children, I would argue every one of my participants had been affected by the One-child policy in one way or another, even if they did not necessarily consider that to be the case. In addition to discussing their opinions on having siblings and their parents' plans to have additional children (or lack thereof), some also talked at length about their opinions about only children, the generalizations that exist, and if they believe the policy has personally affected their lives.

Among my participants, seven of eleven shared that they knew young people who have siblings, or in the case of one participant, that they themselves have siblings. The desire to have siblings was quite prevalent among my participants, with seven of ten only children indicating that they would have liked to have a sibling. Four of the seven would have preferred a brother to a sister, and four of seven would have preferred an older sibling to themselves. These four were not the same four, but three of four who preferred a brother wanted an older brother, and three of four who wanted an older sibling would have preferred that older sibling to be a brother.

Because of the variation in my interviews, I did not always speak with respondents about their opinions of only children, but when the topic came up, their opinions were remarkably similar. Of the four interviewees who brought up selfishness, all four replied that they thought only children were more selfish than children with siblings. The five who discussed responsibility shared that they believed that only children have more responsibility than children with siblings. Five, again all respondents

who brought up the idea on their own, thought of themselves as their family's only hope. Six believed and shared either directly or through inference that only children have trouble sharing with others.

As for their opinions on the One-child policy itself, there was great variation in responses. The similarities here lie in perspective, and on the ways that respondents viewed their own lives. Among interviewees who opened up about their personal opinions on the One-child policy, all mentioned that they believed there was no other solution for China's population crisis than the One-child policy. Of the five students who brought this up, all five mentioned that the One-child policy had had negative consequences in Chinese society, while only two of the five mentioned that it had been responsible for positive social change on a national scale. In general terms, eight of eleven believed that the policy had affected their lives. Six of these eight believed that the policy had affected them in both direct and indirect ways, while two believed they had only been affected by it indirectly.

In her interview, Ying (Y. Sun, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013) shared the feelings she had had in her childhood related to her only-child status. She described feeling jealousy that her parents had both grown up with siblings while she did not, saying, "I thought, 'Oh, this is so unfair for me, I don't have any siblings.' I just think, 'Oh, I really wish there was another policy, that it won't be any one-child policy.'"

However, she does not believe that any circumstances would have allowed her to have siblings because of the high cost of raising children in urban China, and she recognizes that as an only child she may shoulder more responsibility than others. It also affects, in her mind, how she interacts with others.

Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) shared her belief that only children enter society unequipped to handle some of the challenges that they face. She frames this, interestingly enough, in the context of military power:

[People are] crazy about how to find money to support their family. They ... have to do [this] because the government [does] not give that strong support for ... the family, for us... I feel if there was a war [in Asia], I don't think the Chinese army will [do well in] the war. [It does not] matter how they have [better] weapons than before, because every soldier, *all* those, they come from one child family. They-- ...they think a lot, you know? -- they ... can't sacrifice themselves without thinking about their parents. If they died, who will support their parents?

At the same time, she also believes that the policy has had some positive social applications in China. She explains how the policy has affected the treatment of girls within the context of Chinese traditional son preference:

The only advantage for this policy, I think, is [changing]... women's social status in China... During thousands of years [there has been] discrimination [against] women and limits [to] their rights... it's really hard to change the—this traditional value... but I think thanks to the policy... the people [have] no choice [but] to accept the children—the children being a woman, you know?... So, if there is a baby girl, they will... care about their girls and make the whole family [to] honor on this girl to raise the girl like a son.

Min's description of the social benefits and challenges are compelling points in the continuing argument for and against the One-child policy.

Yan (P. Yan, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013) shared that she wished that she had had a sibling by blood. She shared that, “many Chinese girls dream [about having an] older brother to protect them, and you have somebody to talk to, and they’re older than you, and they’re not a girl, they’re a boy... most of us have this dream when we’re young.”. This opinion was shared by Jing (J. Li, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013), who wanted to have an older brother to take care of her and protect her. Yan (Nov. 8, 2013) believed that if the policy did not exist, life would be much different for children. She, along with others, support the idea of policy changes in the future that would allow her to have more than one child.

Three participants (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 1, 2013; M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013; F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013) described their family’s experiences with the One-child policy when their parents had more than one child. I will detail these for Min (Nov. 4, 2013) and Fang (Nov. 21, 2013) in the next chapter. Xiuying (Nov. 1, 2013), however, shared that her mother had been pregnant several times when she was younger, but that their family does not talk about it. She noted that when women have lots of babies they spend their time raising them rather than doing other things like working on her career. Now that she is older she wishes that she had a brother or sister who could help look after her parents and grandparents while she is abroad studying. However, she also admits that coming from city, few families can even afford to have a second child because the costs associated with raising children are very high.

Trends Among Case Study Participants

In the following chapter I will go into greater detail describing the lives of four participants in my study. These four individuals are ones who represent majority (or generalizable) opinions when it comes to gender, education, family dynamic and the One-child policy, but whose personal experiences allow us to understand these trends' implications for individual, lived experience. While each of the individuals interviewed in this research represented a different perspective, the four case studies presented compelling, thoughtful stories that challenge the notions that even the experiences of individuals in this small survey can be completely understood through generalizable trends.

The trends found throughout the data I collected would be incomplete without paying consideration to the individual experiences of each participant. Though I cannot present all eleven as case studies, what I can present are the stories of four fascinating, and unique cases: Ying (Y. Sun, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013), the careful critic; Min (X. Wang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013), the self-described failure; Xiulan (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2013), the individualist; and Fang (F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013), the sibling. In the next chapter, I will share their stories and present how their variations on the trends discussed throughout my research promote the consideration of individual experience and the intersectionality of these women's lives.

CHAPTER IV

VARIATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

When I interviewed Zhang Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013), she commented extensively on her views on the One-child policy, and what the policy had meant to her family. A Party member herself, she comes from a very strong Communist background, so much so that she believes her parents, who desired to have multiple children, were unable to do so. Her father had worked in family planning on a provincial level, and both of her parents had government jobs. She described her family's situation to be this way:

My father had been ... had been the person who charge -- take charge ... to, uh, find people who have second children and punish them, yeah and... you know, [he was] a person who [represented] this policy in my city, so that [means] my family can't have second child. You are the model, you know. You are the authority to represent this policy, of course you can't have a second child!

The candor with which she discussed her personal opinions about the One-child policy, as well as the myriad other topics about which I asked her during our interview, made her stand out as exemplary. The four women I will feature in this chapter of case studies, in fact, all stand out in particularly poignant ways, and for many different reasons. These women's individualities cut through what could have been considered "standard" experiences based solely on trends I noticed in the data.

Among the four primary points of research I have discussed in the previous chapters, each of the cases deviates from the "standard" established as trend in Chapter III. While they may deviate in significant ways across each of the four research areas

(gender, education, family dynamic, and the One-child policy), each of the women makes strong arguments in her interview for individuality within one of these areas, and in very compelling ways. Their interviews contradict the narrative that the media has written for them as Chinese only children, women, and students.

While many of the research participants remained adamant that gender did not affect their lives or their experiences, some interviewees had the opposite reaction. For several of the participants in my study they acknowledged that gender did play a role in their lives, either in the context of their relationships to extended family or to education. As I will detail below, Sun Ying (personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013) spoke extensively about her family's reaction when they found out her mother had borne a girl rather than a boy. Another participant (H. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2013) described her suspicions that her parents or their parents had wanted a boy because she had been given a very masculine name at birth, and decided to change her name to something more feminine in her adolescence. Two others indicated that gender had been an issue among extended family (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013; L. Tao, personal communication, Dec. 5, 2013), a situation that they blamed on traditional ideas that they themselves did not believe.

Most of the women I interviewed presented a standard view of Chinese education, even though some of them indicated that they had not been strong students in this educational model. However, there were instances in which participants detailed innovations being piloted by Chinese schools to counteract some of the pressure that Chinese students experience. Yan (Y. Peng, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013) discussed how her high school had done away with public ranking systems, implemented

infrastructure to increase students' extra-curricular activities, and even removed the differentiation between science, art, literature, and social science classes during her year. Her high school was so well known for the quality of its students and its innovative practices that when she went to college in an even larger city than she had come from, other students from around the country had heard of her school and the work that they had done to encourage individuality and expression. Zhang Min (personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) had a very different high school experience than what has been promoted as well. As a private school student, which in China means she scored lower in testing than a public school student, she says that she experienced a nurturing educational environment while also receiving messaging from the system that this school would never prepare her well enough to merit a good score on the college entrance examination.

Family relationships and dynamics, likewise, have proved to be key factors in shaping the way that my study participants thought about themselves and their lives. However, while many talked about the pressure they experienced, or pressure that they heard about from others, some families provided a very different basic understanding of what constituted achievement. For Wu Xiulan (personal communication, Nov. 14, 2013), the idea of individualism has shaped her family. Many of her family's decisions have revolved around ideas taken from the West, and many family decisions have been made in accordance to these ideas, including her decision to study in the United States. Xiulan is not the only participant whose parents or extended family encouraged their individuality; others (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013; N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013; X. Huang, personal communication, Nov. 22, 2013) have focused on their child's happiness above their scholastic or personal achievement.

The One-child policy has affected each of the participants in my study, but each individual responded differently when they were asked about the policy and how it had related to their own lives. Some claimed its effects had been minimal or nonexistent (Y. Peng, personal communication, Nov. 8, 2013; N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. Nov. 15, 2013); several others that its effects had been indirect. However, several others cited direct ways that they had been affected by the policy. They reported these effects in different ways, from Ying's (Y. Sun, personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013) discussion of the policy's utilitarianism; to Min's (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) explanation of her parents motivation for having a second child; to Fang's (F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013) description of what her family had endured when her mother had been pregnant with her, the family's second daughter. Each of these experiences is different from every other, each has had different life experiences; and in the cases of these four individual women, each has come to a conclusion that while they do not necessarily like the One-child policy and they accept that it has had negative consequences both on a personal and social scale, they do not see what other route China could have taken during the critical period during which the policy was enacted.

Across all of the experiences I gathered, not just in the case studies but every woman I spoke with about her life, the most common thread between them all was individuality. In the following case studies, I hope to express the individual stories that were presented to me in a way that captures the complexity of the women that they represent.

Sun Ying: The Girl with a Boy's Name

When I first met Sun Ying (personal communication, Oct. 24, 2013) I was taken aback at how directly she approached challenges in her life. As a single child from a middle class family in urban China, her parents had told her from a young age that she would never have a little brother or sister even if she wanted one. She grew up with a boy's name—"Ying" (英)¹⁹ is a name that is commonly given to boys and much more uncommonly to girls. It usually means "brave," and when combined with other syllables makes a group of feminine names. On its own, however, it is more masculine; if not more masculine, it is at least more unisex than many other names. To some extent, her life history can be understood better through her name. She is brave; she has the drive to improve her life and the lives of her family members, and she encountered challenges in life on the basis of gender.

Ying completed her undergraduate degree in China, and is a graduate student now. As someone who did well in the Chinese education system she had a more mellow critique of education. She discussed her classrooms, the difficulty she experienced going through high school and taking the college entrance examination, and the anxiety associated with waiting for her scores before she knew whether or not she would be able to go to college. In her case, she experienced success. She scored well enough to attend University, which she parlayed into an opportunity to study abroad at the University of Oregon.

¹⁹ As I mentioned in Chapter I, I have changed all names for confidentiality reasons. In order to properly share this story, I asked for Sun Ying's input in choosing a pseudonym that would carry the same weight as her own name without disclosing her identity. "Ying" was the given name that she thought would best embody her own name's significance, a name that is unisex but more commonly assigned to boys than girls.

It was while talking with Ying about her family that I first noticed the effects that gender had had on her. She shared many stories about her family history in addition to her experiences as an only child. Her interview exemplifies the tension that can exist between generations, especially within the context of China as a developing nation. For Ying's immediate family, her mother and father, Ying's biology seemed to make little difference, and she did not report feeling excluded on account of her gender growing up. However, she did disclose some experiences with gender bias from her paternal grandmother, who vocally indicated her desire for a grandson when her mother was pregnant. Her father, the youngest child in his family, had always been his mother's favorite, and Ying admitted to experiencing emotional distress over her grandmother's lack of interest in her life because she was not a grandson. She recounted this story to me, which illustrated her grandmother's attitude:

[When I was born] my my dad's mom, my grandma, didn't even want to hold me, that's what my mom told me. She didn't really like me at all... It's like, I was a disappointment to her. So, over the years she didn't really like me at all. Yeah, I don't know why, but she really didn't like me, and she thought because I was her only hope and she would say that the family name cannot be passed down, you know. It's gonna be-- it's gonna disappear. It's a very traditional Chinese way of thinking.

Ying's grandmother's lack of interest when she was born created a bitterness within the family, particularly a bitterness from Ying toward her father's family, which has caused her significant discomfort in her life. Ying reported that she feels as though her parents' attitudes have not reflected the same beliefs as her grandmother; however, I question the

accuracy of this assumption in the context of how her father named her when she was born, a situation she spoke of several times during the interview.

Anecdotally, Ying had expressed an off-handed kind of annoyance about her name. However, during her interview it became much clearer where that aggravation stemmed from internally, and how much her parents' decision to choose a stereotypically male name for her had affected her. To introduce the subject, she described the situation in her family when her mother had been pregnant:

...they were all expecting a boy, because from the look of the belly some superstition say, oh you'll have a boy. Everybody was saying that my mom was having a boy, and although they prepared two names... a typical girl's name, or ... also typical Chinese girl's name. And then prepared one boy's name which is Ying, my current name... [They] were all sure that I was a boy, but then they saw that I was a girl. My dad was like, "whatever, I like this name really a lot, I'm going to use this name." My name is still a typical guy's name.

I do not believe that Ying's descriptions of the names themselves and what they represent indicate her displeasure with her name. However, the context of her relationship with her father's extended family, as well as her own parents, complicates the connotation of Ying's traditionally male given name.

Ying spoke candidly throughout the interview about her parents, their relationship, and her relationship to them individually and as a family unit. She explained to me that she thought they should not have gotten married in the first place, and throughout her interview she spoke of her father especially in very negative terms. She indicated that he took advantage of what are considered traditional Chinese gender roles, leaving her

mother to take care of the home and raise Ying mostly on her own while he spent his free hours out of the house after work. He left the job of caring for the household to Ying's mother, despite the fact that both of them worked full-time outside the home. She described his attitude as traditional in many respects, because it was based in traditions that the society from which he came expected him to perform as a man.

Despite her candor and her issues with her father, Ying was very clear that he had never given any outward indication that he would have preferred a son to a daughter. She said, "he never talk[ed] to me about like wanting a boy or something." However, the situation was significantly more complicated than just her gender when Ying was a child, because it dealt with what are considered "normal behaviors" of individuals in Chinese society, not just gender roles, even though many of these "normal behaviors" have strong ties to gender roles. She explained it through her mother's point of view, which she had grown to understand over time:

[F]rom my mom's point of view, he never wanted a child. Not --... I mean, he had a family because this is what was expected [of him] from the society, not only from his family but from the society, the whole society. It's weird [*according to society*²⁰], if you don't have a wife and don't have a child. Um, so he got married and had me because it was what expected from a man in the society. My mom said he never cared about his wife or child. What's the point of getting married and having a child if you don't want to?

Ying masked her feelings about this situation while we discussed this, though it became clear as the conversation continued that she harbored a great resentment towards her father for his attitude towards her and her mother. Those attitudes were very much

²⁰ Emphasis and addition inside parentheses my own.

steeped in the gendered stereotypes and expectations he felt inclined to live up to as an adult, which were the same standards to which he held his wife and daughter.

Ying's feelings of mistrust and resentment towards her father and his attitude rose to a head when she described how she felt when he took credit, as her father, for the advances that she felt she made on her own. She explained, "...my mom told me that sometimes if I get good scores, grades in school, he would brag about them among his colleagues. I said, 'don't say anything about me! They're your friends, I don't care about them but don't involve me; I don't want them to know anything about me.'" Ying expressed her anger at the situation, and her wishes that she not be an object for her parents', specifically her father's, edification. She did not want her parents to live vicariously through her.

In this context, Ying expressed that she desired her experiences to be only hers. She described her complicated relationship with her father (and the baggage that accompanied his attitude, much of which traced back to what it had traditionally meant to "be a man" in China) through the lens of her education very well. Even though she was a girl, even though family had confirmed for her that her gender had been a problem for her paternal grandmother, and even though she knew that her father had chosen a traditional boy's name for his baby daughter, she did not want her accomplishments to be fodder for her father's ego. His role as her father, in her mind, did not entitle him to take credit for her accomplishments. She explained:

Sometimes he felt like me in the US was something like he wanted to brag about, it's like his own accomplishment. I think, "No, don't tell your friends I'm in the US or anything, I don't want them to know. Don't tell them." That's what I would

sa[y]. That's all. ... Cuz sometimes I think he find disappoint[ment]-- and then if I didn't get good grades in high school, he would be disappointed, but he never said anything like that because this didn't really happen. But I figure if I didn't really get good scores he would like address this issue, I think.

More than anything, it seemed Ying wanted to be considered as a separate entity from her father. As father and daughter they had never experienced challenges around her schoolwork or academic capacity, though she now believes that if she had not performed well in high school her father would have intervened. While gender may not directly influence Ying's thoughts on her father's expectations, they reflect a commonly shared cultural idea that the father should be responsible for the education of his children.

When Ying described her experiences as a student of Chinese education, many of the stories she told represented the common themes discussed in Chapter III. She described her experiences in high school and as an undergraduate student, and the circumstances that allowed her to come to the United States; and while she did not indicate that the experiences had been easy ones, she did recall them with a measure of nostalgia. When I asked her about her experience taking the college entrance examination she described what the weather had been like when she took the test, and how she had felt pressure leading up to the test itself, but these descriptions waned in comparison to the days following the test.

Ying explained that it was a common practice in China for newspapers to publish the correct answers to the college entrance examination, including sample essays, in the days following the exam:

Oh my God, I didn't want to look at it! Especially my math problems, because each blank was five points. That was a lot to change your fate. ... That night I had a really bad dream, because I knew the newspaper was there at home. I was too scared to open it and check out the answers! And I had a nightmare that -- oh my god! Check this answer, wrong! Check this answer, wrong! It was terrible, but I was lucky when I opened up the newspaper: all of the answers were right. Yeah, so I knew that I didn't do terribly, like bad in my math you know test. So I could estimate my own score.

A couple of weeks later, Ying was able to call a phone number to find out how she had scored on the test, and where she ranked in relation to every one of the other 500,000 students in her province that had sat for the same test at the same time. She had scored high enough to go to a good University on China's Eastern seaboard.

Ying described her family experiences in unique terms and her educational experiences in more common terms. Gender has played into her life more in her experiences with family than in education, but regardless of whether or not she feels she has been treated differently in her immediate family because of her gender, she does feel as though she has been treated differently because she was an only child. She spoke critically of the One-child policy from the very beginning. At the start of the interview, when I first asked if she had anything preliminary she wanted to share about her family²¹,

²¹ This is how I began all of my interviews. I had met all of my participants but one woman at least once prior to interviewing them. In an effort to encourage trust, I asked each participant to meet me for coffee or tea before the interview so that I could explain the background of my research and what kinds of questions they could expect when we talked formally. In these coffee/tea meetings I asked them to come prepared to our interview with a story or an observation about their family. Many told me stories about their families on the spot that I asked them to tell again later when we met formally. Ying's response was one that she reiterated at the beginning of her interview.

Ying did not waste any time, and started in immediately talking about her personal reasons for disliking the One-child policy:

When I was little, ... I thought about my parents' families and I think, they both- *both* of them- have siblings, and I thought, 'Oh this is so unfair for me, I don't have any siblings.' I'd just think, 'Oh, I really wish there was another policy that it won't be any one-child policy, otherwise I would have [siblings].'

However, despite her dislike of being an only child, she did recognize the benefits that she has received because of it. Ying is critical of the One-child policy, but equally critical of those who claim that the policy is somehow characteristically Chinese, Communist, or unfair to the greater population. She is critical of the policy for more than just personal reasons; but at the same time has had difficulty with the Western or American perspective on the policy, particularly what she characterizes as eagerness among Americans to dismiss the policy as a violation of human rights. She believes, as do many others, that the policy served a necessary purpose. Had it been enacted earlier in modern Chinese history, she believes it could have done even more good for China's population than it already has. She explained:

I think if the policy was carried in the 50s it would have been much better... and the Cultural Revolution wouldn't [have been] as bad... [I] still it [the Cultural Revolution] would be a disaster, but it would be a little better than that....

Generally speaking I think it was a smart decision. And, um, I think if you grew up in China, you couldn't come up with a better policy... I feel that a lot of times a lot of foreigners are really interested in this policy because it's only in China; it's very unique, this policy... And they--they never really understand this policy.

From their point of view, [they think] “Oh your government is, like, arbitrary, [it controls] everything in your life ... you’re from a Communist country! [The] Communist party [did] this to you!” And if you grow up in China... it's funny, cuz when I go to China, it's like "uh, [there are] so many people!" ... We are already [did] a great job in controlling the population, and but still [are] a lot of people! But if it were not for that policy, we would see crazy stuff there! So, they ... complain about those things but they still don't understand the policy.

Though Ying has personal reasons for disliking the One-child policy, those personal reasons do not outweigh what she believes the positive outcomes have been as a result of the policy. She is aware of the effects on China’s overall population that she perceives to be related to the One-child policy, and concludes that the policy has had some positive effects in the long-run. She urges people considering the policy to think about it in a larger context, and to approach the issue of fertility control with an open mind. For non-Chinese, particularly the Americans whom she has known personally, to judge the One-child policy, Chinese people, or the Chinese government harshly while also bemoaning the situation in China’s overcrowded cities at the same time is hypocritical and shows a fundamental lack of understanding.

Zhang Min²²: The Failure

When I met Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) for the first time the weather had just started to turn cold. Min has a quiet and thoughtful demeanor, which seemed incongruent with the strength and conviction of her answers at first. When

²² Min’s grammar, while easy to understand during the interview, did not transcribe easily. Note that I have inserted many brackets to correct the grammar so that her meaning can be better understood. While it may make the transcription less technically correct, I believe it helps facilitate understanding tremendously.

she answered my call for participants I had been excited to meet with her, as she had described herself as a feminist. While I have known many Chinese women who display what I consider to be feminist attitudes, Min was the first I had met who self-identified in those terms. She also clearly defined herself in both our first meeting and official interview as a Communist, and a card-carrying Communist Party member.

However, feminist and communist were only some of the ways that Min described herself. Most notably, she also called herself a classic failure of the Chinese education system.

At 27 years old, she was finishing her undergraduate degree, which she had begun less than three years earlier, and in the United States. She had attended a private high school in China, and though she was a gifted musician and athlete, the education system did not value her because she did not conform to its academic standards. She had trouble memorizing, and was labeled as a poor student early in her academic career. As the only interviewee in my study who attended a private school, her perspective on education was unique, and her experiences in school unlike any of the others I interviewed.

As I noted in Chapter III, private schools in China are not designed for high achieving students. In fact, private schools are for students who have little hope of doing well enough on the college entrance examinations to go to University in China. Min described her private school as very different from a Chinese public school:

[I]n public school they [are] really compete[tive]. ... The people who [go to] public school ... they [are] more likely to attend a university. They have [bigger] chance than us. [Because] people who choose private school... [their families] have some money and [they don't really] care whether [their] children can get

university or not. So, the pressure for us [was] not that high. And because [the school] type is private... like the U.S. universities, students [are] the owners of the school because we pay the money to support [it]. So, they [do] not push us very harshly. They just ... kind of, nurturing us to study.

The system that she described was far less harsh than the experiences of the other interview participants, even others who described themselves as poor students, because of the nature of the school she attended. Rather than being at school (in classes and study sessions) from early morning until nine o'clock in the evening or later, as was the case with many participants, Min's classes finished between three and five o'clock every afternoon. This experience departs significantly from what other students described.

Min noted that her poor performance in school was not highly criticized by her parents, which she based on her father's experiences when he had been in school. According to Min, her father had also failed to meet scholastic expectations, and had only achieved a University acceptance out of stubbornness. She explained that her father had been a poor student in high school, and during that time his high school teachers punished him severely. He responded by getting angry and studying very hard so that he could gain admission into University, thereby showing them that he could achieve it if he put his mind to it. However, this experience did not leave him with the opinion that a college education meant overall success in life. She explained:

He didn't think the people who get high degree will [have a] splendid future. So he didn't [tell me that I] must be have a degree or something. He always [told] me, the only thing we want you to [do] is [become] a happy person. ... [W]hat you [choose],

even [if] you don't study very well, [doesn't matter.] If you are ... [an honest person] and have [a good manner], then we consider you [to be] a good child. Ultimately, Min came to the decision to pursue a degree beyond high school on her own terms. When she made the decision to return to school, she had already worked for several years in one of China's largest cities, and had discovered that in order to progress beyond a certain level she would need more than a high school diploma. Ultimately, she decided to study abroad to increase her chances of getting into a good school.

Min's experiences in Chinese education left her dissatisfied with the quality of schooling she received. As a non-traditional student (i.e. a student who did not answer questions in traditional ways, or was averse to memorization), she challenged the education system. She not only was unable to attend a Chinese University, she was unable to attend a Chinese public high school because of her poor performance on standardized entrance tests. She explained her bias to me as personal:

I don't like [that] people taught me, 'you should memorize this, this, this, and you can't ask questions on the standard answer.' ... They forced... all the people [to follow] the same form. They just want the people [to] look all the same, and they don't cultivate your... idea[s] or thoughts. They just want you [to] become a machine to learn and memorize all the stuff that the book [says]. I really hate this system. So, from elementary school until the high school, [I fought] with teachers all the time. ...That [means I] can't survive in this educational system. ...I don't memorize the answer, then I got a lower score. Um, so [when I took exams] in high school, I'm always [scoring] very low. [That gives] me no chance to take Chinese university, any Chinese university. I'm a standard bad student in China.

Min's description of her experience warrants some important questions about the system in which she studied, which I addressed more specifically in Chapter II. Min even hones in on the historical and cultural significance of study, explaining that "since the ancient times until now, they all very [much] respect people who study very well." She goes on to describe the systematic judgment of a person's capacity based on their ability to memorize. She calls Chinese students "study machines," and explains that they do not "judge people based on their virtue or based on their behavior they just [judge] based on the score."

It became clear through the interview that Min's frustration with the education system was more complicated than simple complaints about unfair pressure and conformity, but dealt with a fundamental and institutional discrimination against non-traditional students. This extends past the students themselves to the schools they attend and any special talents that they may have. Min identified herself as a talented musician and athlete. Yet the schools in which she enrolled did not see her that way.

To Min, students such as herself are fundamentally limited because their aptitude falls outside traditional scholastic boundaries. While some students may be good at other things, the system cannot recognize their talents "because they [cannot] get [into] high school or [pass] the exam. They [will only] go to like the third level or second level of high school [where they will experience] discrimination from others." She shared that as a young student, experiencing this kind of pressure from the school system was very difficult. As far back as kindergarten she remembers her teachers telling her that she would not succeed.

Min's story inspires a more tolerant attitude than what currently exists about building scholastic capacity within children. She encourages the education system to look at more than just a child's test-taking capacity, especially from a young age. From her own recollection, she did not have trouble learning, she simply came to conclusions using different methodology. She explained, "From very young I [learned] by myself, and I [could] do, um, a lot of activities without [answering in a standard way on tests]. ... [But] nobody [said to me] 'you are good, you are talented.' Nobody [said] it. They will think, 'what's your score on this exam'?"

Min made the decision to continue her education after several years working, a decision that she made on her own terms and with the support of her family.²³ She spoke proudly about her accomplishments at the University of Oregon, because her aptitude made it possible for her to complete her undergraduate degree in only two and-a-half years. This would be an accomplishment for anyone, but for a student who had been told starting in kindergarten that she would not succeed in education, it seems a welcome change.

Min categorized herself as bad student, but she recognized that many Chinese students performed well under the Chinese education system. On the other side of the spectrum that she represents are the women who perform well, who excel in high school and University, and choose to have careers. Yet, these women also experience challenges. Min described the social phenomenon referred to as "leftover women," who are women who have exceeded a traditionally acceptable marriageable age and chosen to have careers instead of marriage and family immediately after finishing University.

²³ Min reported that while her parents hesitated at first in letting her study abroad for University, they eventually agreed to let her come to the United States. As other participants described in their interviews, her parents had to be convinced that going alone to the United States was a safe thing for her to do on her own.

In China there is a title for the woman who [is] called “left-over lady,” *shengnv*.

Personally I don’t like this title, cuz it’s kind of a negative title for women.

Actually, the women who [are] left-over always have the high education background, and the highest income, and the high I.Q. [Customarily], Chinese families... match their background perfectly.²⁴ So [it makes it] hard for the women who live in the big city [who] have this background when they should find [a] male because there [is an] unbalanced birthrate between the big city and the village.

Min recognizes that both success and failure come with a different set of difficulties, while simultaneously challenging the idea that traditional methods of reacting to these challenges may not be in the best interests of the individual. A parallel exists between the ladies who have not gotten married, who chose instead to advance their careers, and Min’s own experiences as a woman who did not benefit from the education system. Both Min and a successful woman have to confront traditions that influence how they should act, given their respective social positions. Min chose not to conform, just as the “left-over ladies” have chosen not to conform, and challenged the educational tradition that told her she needed to behave a certain way in order to succeed in life.

Despite what she and the system consider her failure, Min’s experiences in life, her perspectives, and her thoughtful nature identify her as anything but a failure. Her educational background is not the only aspect of her individuality that make her an exceptional case. During her interview, there were many times she distinguished her

²⁴ She is referring here to traditional matchmaking practices that happen in Chinese families, and to some extent continue to happen today. Min related in her story that her parents had met through a matchmaker, because both of their families had been concerned about finding a suitable match based on their longstanding history in the Chinese Communist Party.

perspective as remarkable, and her educational experiences were just one of those.

Toward the end of our interview she spoke at great length about her opinions about the One-child policy, which she expressed separately from her identity as a member of the Communist Party because she takes pride in her membership in the Party and her family's long history of support for Communism.

Min is a third-generation Party member, and joined the Party at age 18. She spoke proudly about her grandfather, who joined the Party before the conclusion of the Communist revolution in 1949. Min's father, also a Party member, worked as a family planning official enforcing the One-child policy in their city during her childhood. Min described to me the process by which one is allowed to join the Party, and the rigorous requirements that she had to meet in order to join when she did.

However, Min also told a story about something that had happened to her family when she was an adolescent, about the time she was in middle school. When she was in middle school, Min's mother accidentally got pregnant. She described the situation surrounding the pregnancy and the perspectives of her parents sympathetically:

At that time she [had] already made [up] her mind to have the second child, no matter [that]... there [was] a big risk [that] the government party will ... make her lose [her] job, [or] something. But my parents already decided to have this child. Um, and it just ... disappeared by accident, not ... by my mother's choice... so my mother [was] sad a long time for this. ... That's the first time I realized they [were] eager to have a second child. ... And my mother now sometimes will talk to me, [saying] if you get marri[ed] you should have lots of children.

For Min's parents, having a second child was a possibility that included personal risk. Since they were both employed by the government, her parents risked losing their jobs, which Min acknowledges. As Party members, they may have risked losing membership for not following the rules set out by the government. As a former enforcer of the One-child policy in their city, her father also may have lost face in their city over having a second child if he had been involved in any coercive measures to control others' fertility.

Their family found itself in a precarious position. Despite the fact that her mother did not carry the fetus to term, the experience of her pregnancy and the family's grappling with the consequences affected Min and her opinions about the One-child policy. She shared with me that she believes that the policy has had drastic, negative consequences. She sees the potential risk in the expanding aging population that has accompanied the fertility transition, particularly the increasing pressure placed on the government's retirement system and the younger members of the workforce. Additionally, especially in urban areas, many young women have delayed getting married, becoming the "leftover ladies," she referenced earlier in the interview.

The other repercussions of the One-child policy that Min noted may or may not relate to her or her own experiences. She commented that trade and production may suffer, and even the Chinese military. She explained:

I think this kind of social question all can root from the One-child policy a little bit. ... [People are] just crazy about how to find money to support their family. They're really really not willing to do [this], but they have to ... because the government not give that strong support for ... the family, for us. ... I feel if ... a war happen[s] in the Asia, I don't think the Chinese army will [do] good [in] the

war. No matter [if] they have [better] weapons than before, because ... all those they come from one child family ... they can't sacrifice themselves without thinking about their parents. If they died, who will support their parents?

Her perspective of the severity of these consequences could be related in part to her family history, particularly to having a military officer in her family. However, this does not diminish the severity of her suggestion. At the same time, however, she credits the policy with helping advance the position of women throughout China, which I mentioned in Chapter III. According to Min, modern women in China do not operate under the same oppressive systems they once did. She credits Chairman Mao and the One-child policy for helping to create changes in the system that benefit women. She explains, “Although Chairman Mao claims that women can be in the other side of the sky²⁵, actually it’s really hard to change... this traditional value... But I think thanks to the policy, [people] have no choice [but] to accept [their child being a woman].” While she considers the policy to have created more problems than solutions in China, this positive affect is one from which she herself may have benefitted.

Min might not consider herself lucky; in fact, in some ways she considers herself a failure. However, the truth remains that she was able to come to the United States to study at great cost to herself and her family, despite the fact that she was labeled a failure by the secondary education system in China. Though she could not continue her study in China, she was able to use her position as an only child to continue her education in the United States.

²⁵ She is referring here to a famous proclamation made by Mao Zedong during the 1950s that “Women hold up half the sky.” The quotation has since been used by influential individuals and organizations working toward gender equality in China. Most world-renowned of these has been undertaken by journalists Nicholas Kristoff and Cheryl WuDunn. See: Kristof, N. D., & WuDunn, S. (2009). *Half the sky: turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Wu Xiulan: The Individualist

I met Xiulan (X. Wu, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2013) by accident. When we had our first conversation, her confidence and outgoing nature struck me, as did her individuality. These were the characteristics that led me to invite her to participate in my research. It was not until I interviewed her, however, that I realized that the confidence and individuality that she presented to me reflected the family that had raised her. Far from the assumption of communality that gets associated with families in Chinese society, Xiulan's family demonstrates an individualistic spirit that has shaped her approach to life and learning.

The reach of individuality in her family extends far beyond her own experiences, and contradicts existing narratives that describe Chinese families (particularly parents) as focused solely on their only child's educational achievements. Her parents made the decision to move to Southern China to one of Guangdong province's Special Economic Zones²⁶, which are cities that have been designated under special jurisdiction of the Chinese government. These cities are widely accepted as locations with great market freedom. The choice that her family made to relocate to this city from central China indicated their entrepreneurial spirit, which Xiulan identified as a hallmark of people who relocate there:

But the majority of [location] people come from the other part of China. And then, for this group people, their goal actually pretty similar... they want to establish their own company, they want to earn money... And then so um, [they are] just

²⁶ There are three Special Economic Zones in Guangdong Province, on China's Southern seaboard. In the interest of confidentiality, I will not specify which city Xiulan comes from.

like a group of people [who have] left their hometown[s], and they come to... a really new city, really new life, lifestyle... I would say these... features [make the location] a really special city in China.

Though initially from rural China, and though they retained their ties to family in the countryside, Xiulan's parents decided to move to the Special Economic Zone instead of staying in the rural areas.²⁷

To Xiulan, the desire to relocate and, in her opinion, better themselves, also reflects the status her parents held within their own families. She describes both of her parents as success stories, especially among their extended families. She explained:

As I mentioned before, my parents [are] actually quite... open-minded somehow. It's because... do you know, in China we have a really interesting kind of phenomenon.... In a family they have a lot of children, but not all of them will become really—really, you know, successful. ... Maybe like one of them or two of them will become really special, or just will become different than others. ... Fortunately my father and my mother [are] the one[s] that actually became pretty successful compared to their brothers and sisters. So, my mother um, she is really talented in drawing, like oil painting. ... Her goal was to become [an] artist somehow. ...It's [a] kind of idealism.

While she did not comment on this specifically, I wondered how her parents' success influenced her, both as a young woman in primary and secondary school, and now as a college student in the United States. Now, as their only child, Xiulan had an impressive

²⁷ While it is not confined to Special Economic Zones, the spread of idealism is especially noticeable in these cities, which tend to be more technologically advanced than others. For a persuasive account of growing individualism in China, see: Yan, Y. (2009). *The individualization of Chinese society* (English ed.). Oxford: Berg.

example to live up to, not only as the only child but as the only child of the successful children of both extended families.

Xiulan was heavily influenced throughout childhood and adolescence by the experiences of her parents, particularly her father's insistence on individuality. These experiences shaped her concept of self, how she related to peers, and her relationship to Chinese society in general. She described to me how her father had been influenced by the work of 20th century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, whose book "Existentialism" was a primary influence in her father's ideals and values. Very specifically, she recognized that "Existentialism" was the reason why her father had educated her the way he did, and why he had encouraged her to develop talents outside the realm deemed acceptable by the education system. She considers the book to be more closely related to American or Western values than Chinese, because of the focus on allowing "people ... to have their own goals,... self-achievement and self-success."

When describing the influence of Sartre on her family, she continued on to relate it directly to her own experiences with her father. When his lessons about individualism and individual achievement started to become relevant for her, Xiulan found herself pulled into different directions by her family and the society that told her that her individuality could only benefit her within the confines of the existing education system, which promised success to the students who excelled at conforming. She explained,

The Western philosophy... or spirit, or values influenced [my father] for a really long time. ... And also my father's learning design [were also influenced by] ... Western values. ... Western values kind of like became a direction, or... the spiritual direction for him. ... When I was really young,... in junior high or

something (because, you know, junior high is kind of like the first level that people begin to have their own something [special])... my father always told me that if you want to become a successful person... you have to get rid of the mediocre stuff. You... need to become different and you need to have your own personality, which is different than the other Chinese students.

At this time in her life, it became clear that her father's expectations and society's expectations differed on a fundamental level, and that she received messages from both that contradicted each other. As a young person, being pulled in two different directions by her family and society must have been a confusing experience.

At the same time her father reminded her about his expectations for her, her friends started getting serious about their studies. She explained that when she was thirteen and fourteen, she was getting the social messages from her friends that what she should be doing was "going to school every day... finishing our homework, otherwise... we cannot get into a good university. And if you cannot get into a good university [it] means that you won't have a good life in the future." At the same time as these social rules played out among her friends, she received a conflicting message from her family. This meant she experienced a different kind of pressure from different but important and influential groups in her life: her family and her friends. Her parents encouraged individualism, pursuing her own talents, and working outside of the system; while her peers encouraged working within the system, because this was the method that they knew could help them succeed and provide for their families in the future.

The perspective that her peers lacked, and that her father provided, focused on what she as an individual could contribute to society in the future. That also meant

pursuing things that made her happy rather than just careers that might earn the most money. She explained,

My father always [emphasized] his ideas. Like... you need to become different. ... You need to have something that *you* are really good at. And this thing will help you... to become [a] successful person in the future. ... And he also encouraged me to do something I want. But unfortunately, when I was like [in] high school or junior high, I think I didn't figure out what his idea [was]. So... my high school life and junior high [were] quite normal... basically the same [as] other Chinese students.

In the short term, Xiulan chose to conform, which meant conforming to society's expectations of her as a student. Her actions also aligned with those of her peer group. This created distance between her and her father. The way her father expressed his disappointment in her actions stayed with her. She said, "he [would] say, 'hey, you... [don't act] like my daughter, because my daughter will, you know... will be [even] better than me.'" She did not specify in what context he expected her to be better, but the expectation of greatness still existed. Receiving these messages from society and family confused her. As we discussed the situation, she elaborated on the social pressure she experienced. She described the pressure in terms of social messages presented to Chinese students:

In society... everyone just tell[s] you, as you're a student you have to have good grades, and then... that's [how] you can go to a really good school; university or something. ... I would say this is a routine, a special routine in China. Yeah. [This is] especially [true if] you're only one child. ... I don't think that parents will

expect [that] their child will be, like, super normal... And it depends on ... like, if you're in high school,... it's really great to have really good scores to prove that you have the capacity of going to a good university and that you might succeed in your life.

Xiulan internalized this social message, and studied hard in high school. She performed well in high school and continued on to an art school in her home province.

However, while she was in college she began to realize that she was not accomplishing everything that she wanted. She began to doubt her choices, and started to wonder if the approach she had taken in high school had been the right one for her. She explained that while she was still an undergraduate in China she felt that she did not “have something that I can, you know, just explore my potential talents or skills,” something her father had tried to encourage her to do from childhood. She had been working in student government while pursuing her art degree, when she realized something very important. She explained, “I spent almost three years working in that organization, and then I suddenly realized that ... the things I'm doing right now, [they are] actually not I want, and somehow I [felt] confused.” The confusion she cited came from the conflict she felt between the social messages and messages from her family.

Xiulan’s final decision was to transfer schools, and explore other academic options that could be made available to her outside of Chinese higher education.²⁸ While making her decision her father and friends both supported her desire to pursue a more personally

²⁸ She did not clarify whether or not it would have been possible for her to study the major program she enrolled in at the University of Oregon, but it is important to note that changing majors in Chinese Universities is very uncommon. Students actually apply for their major when they apply for schools after completing the college entrance examination, which means that when they enroll in University they already have their course of study laid out for them at the beginning.

rewarding track of study. Her face brightened when she talked about making the transition. She described the process she used to make the decision while still in China:

I [felt] like the things I'm learning right now [are] not the ones I really want to learn, or just be passionate about... So I talked to my father and one of my best friends, and then they kind of... [gave] be a suggestion about exploring [myself]. And my father [said], how about... just learning movie or films?

Through the process her father supported her, as did her friends, and she remains happy with her decision to study abroad in the United States, even if the transition to a new country and culture has been a difficult task.

Xiulan's story fascinated me. As the only transfer student in my research population, she occupied an interesting space as an individual who has existed and in some cases thrived in multiple educational systems. Her individual story is equally compelling, and the journey that brought her to study in the United States. Unlike some of her peers, Xiulan experienced an awakening of sorts while still studying at University in China, and this experience encouraged her to study abroad. Combined with her parents' urging, she chose to discontinue studying at a Chinese University and transfer to the United States, where she believed her individuality and creative talents could develop more fully.

Throughout her interview, themes relating to gender and policy were more difficult to track, but her discussion of Chinese education, modernization and Westernization in China was prolific. Likewise, her personal analysis of the One-child policy relates more closely to these themes than others with whom I spoke. Her criticism of the policy arises from what she has witnessed of the pressure put on only children to

perform in education, get good jobs, and finally provide for their families in the long-term. She reported that,

Especially [because of the] only child policy... when you're young, like your parents and your society... have already told you that you need to do something [with your life], but after you finish all the exam[s], you suddenly will feel confused. You will feel confused. You don't know what you need to—[and you do not know] what you want to do.

The pressure that is placed on only children did not extend to her specifically in the same way that it did to other children and adolescents that she knew, but she still identified with their experiences because she experienced the same social pressures as an only child. She recognized that her family situation may have been uncommon, but that not all families were like hers.

[In my family] there's still [the expectation] that... you have a really good score or something, but they [will] not like force you to do that. But I know that there are a lot of parents who'll just ... have a really high expectation of their children. And also, we're the only ones. ...So like, if I have like only one [child], like I will put all of my expectation and all of [the] goals that I didn't pursue it when he was young. So [parents] would just put all this stuff into [their] own children-- own child. ...Can you see the pressure?

Xiulan certainly understood this pressure, and understood how other Chinese only children faced these types of standards within their families.

The difference in experience for her, however, had little to do with her parents and what she would call unrealistic expectations from them. They wanted her to do well,

certainly, but her father especially wanted to instill in her a sense of individualism that would allow her to transcend what he perceived as flaws in Chinese society. Xiulan's decision to postpone her graduation from University in China and transfer to the United States reflected the ideas that her father had passed down to her. It is these same ideas that may be partially responsible for her future success.

Chen Fang: The Sister

Fang's story (F. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013) was very different from the other participants I interviewed, as I have mentioned in other chapters. Fang had the distinction of being my only interview participant with siblings: one older sister, and one younger half-sister²⁹. When I met Fang I was eager to hear about her experiences, and especially eager to identify the ways that her story differed from other narratives on account of the makeup of her family. I anticipated that she would have substantial differences to report in all areas, but was surprised when the life she described growing up seemed closer to a standard narrative than some others. What did differ were the experiences that she related to the One-child policy, and what she had gained as a result of being the youngest of her sisters.

I was introduced to Fang by a mutual acquaintance, and the first time she and I spoke I had little intention to interview her. Because my sample group was intended to comprise only of single children, I initially thought that Fang's story, while important in its own right, might not be properly illustrative of the sample group on which I wished to

²⁹ I do not consider the half-sister a part of her sibling group in the narrative because of the age difference between them. Following her parents' divorce, which I will discuss further, both remarried and her father had another daughter with his second wife. Fang does not have a close relationship with her step-mother or step-half-sister, so considers herself the youngest of a sibling group of two.

focus. On the contrary, her story brought up many salient points that resonated within the stories of other women. At the same time, it also highlighted important differences that highlight the importance of the individual's experience in society. As the second daughter in her family, and also as a successful Chinese student who praised the education system, even the usually dreaded college entrance examination, she exhibited the signs of privileges that may be afforded to only children. As the youngest child, I believe she had a chance to benefit from these privileges.

In terms of the One-child policy, her experiences differed greatly from the other members of my study because she was the younger of two sisters. Her assessment of the policy reflected a type of experience that others could not because she was not an only child. When I asked her about the policy, she told me, "I just know One-child policy is very strict—*was* very strict, but I don't know how strict it was. It was really cruel to a degree." During her interview she shared a very personal story about how her family had been affected by the One-child policy before she was born. The story illustrates the cruelty that she sees in the policy, particularly at that time in the policy's history, the early 1990s.

At the time that Fang was born, the One-child policy was being enforced strictly in her hometown. Fang's sister was about 18 months older than her. Fang described the situation of her birth, and what her family endured in order to have a second child:

When my mother was pregnant, you know at that time in 1992 the one-child policy [was] very strict. And my ... mother ha[d] to hide in others' houses... And when I was born some people ... went to my father's factory -- they destroyed the

machines. And the government cut off electricity in my father's factory, so it was really terrible.

This experience with government coercion is consistent with an anti-One-child policy narrative that abounds in the Western media. It represents the significant experiences of those whose families have experienced the detrimental effects of the policy and, at times, its strict enforcement.

Likewise, Fang described another negative consequence of the policy because of the decision to have a second child. She describes, “my mother ... had to-- she was forced to do like [a] kind of operation, [a] kind of surgery... [*referring to a tubal ligation*] just after one week after I was born. So it's very terrible.” The time during which Fang’s mother was pregnant with her corresponded to a time during the One-child policy’s history (the early 1990s) when enforcement was tight, and during the periods of tightening control sterilization campaigns were quite common.³⁰ If her mother gave birth during a sterilization campaign in their province, it may have complicated the situation for their family.

Fang indicated that her mother had been uncomfortable sharing the story of her birth with her. She learned what she knows about the operation from family members, just as she learned about the repercussions her parents faced for having a second child. “These things [are what] my grandmother told me, and she said... *wa*,³¹ everyone was crying. My mother screamed, they heard she's screaming in the room, and my father's crying, so it's very... a terrible experience I think.” Fang’s mother received a tubal ligation shortly after giving birth, and although her mother has never spoken of it with her directly, she thinks

³⁰ For more information, see Greenhalgh, 1994.

³¹ An exclamation of amazement in Mandarin.

the timing of the procedure was not good for her health in the long term.³² Fang's birth is not the only thing that makes her stand out among my collaborators. In addition to having an older sister and an outstanding student, her family situation has been further complicated by divorce and re-marriage. Her parents divorced when she was fifteen, and have both since remarried. Her father's new wife, whom Fang describes as a significantly younger woman, recently gave birth to her father's third daughter, Fang's half-sister. This is a new family dynamic with which Fang is not yet particularly comfortable, but which she hopes she will come to better understand with time.

She does, however, feel lucky that she has a sister. She realizes that there are many young people who have not had the experience of a sibling, and thinks that there are probably some who envy her for it. She explained that the circumstances surrounding her parents' divorce made it crucial that the sisters had each other to rely on. In her words,

That's why I always feel very lucky, because I have a sister. Actually, my parents just kept fight[ing] for many years before they divorced. And and that's-- I think I'm very lucky because... at that time, you know, I was a teenager. It's the puberty time, and it's very difficult. You know, now there are many teenagers in China that become kind of problem teenagers, most of these because of the family thing. Parents divorce, like that. But I am lucky because I have a sister and all of the years we two just we depend on each other very much, and until now we still say "oh, we are so lucky, we have each other." And that's why I --actually, when I was

³² According to the Mayo Clinic, tubal ligations can be completed right after childbirth or separate from childbirth. They indicate that the enlarged size of the uterus and fallopian tubes right after childbirth can help make the procedure run more smoothly. It is not clear what time-frame they consider to be the recovery period from childbirth. It is also not clear under what conditions Fang's mother's tubal ligation was performed. For more information from the Mayo Clinic, see "Tubal Ligation" in the Reference List.

very young I feel very sad because I know someday my parents would divorced, but because of my sister it's okay,... we can comfort each other. That's good.

The added family connection as sisters made the shared experience of divorce more tolerable for both of them. While not happy that her parents divorced and re-married, the two girls had each other to lean on during this process.

Throughout her interview Fang described her relationship with her sister much more concretely than her relationship with either of her parents. While she suspects that her mother's second pregnancy may have been out of a desire to have a son, she firmly believes that her parents were pleased to have two daughters. She spoke positively about her mother reaction to having daughters: "my mother always feel[s] lucky because she has two daughters. And, I think actually my father, when my mother was pregnant, [he] want[ed] to get a son. They want[ed] to get a son, but finally it's another girl, it's me." She mentioned this offhandedly, without thinking it could be something to be upset about. She also indicated in her interview that after she was born the doctor may have asked her parents if they wanted to keep her, because she had not cried immediately after birth. She thinks that her parents may have considered the possibility of abandoning her, but that her mother had finally declined the doctor's suggestion.

Despite the inherent implications in this situation, it is not clear if gender played a role in this or if the doctors had merely asked the question for health reasons. It became clear in her interview that Fang appreciated the way her father had raised her and her sister. She related that their father had raised them to be independent, and encouraged them to take care of themselves rather than waiting for a man to take care of them. She explained that "he [had] his own policies to raise girls." Starting from a young age, their

father gave them some money every month. She explains, “my mother told me later... ‘that’s because your father [did not] want you two to... depend on boys when you’re grown up.... He [gives] you money so you can buy things for yourself, so ... when you are grown up you will not... be tricked just because of small candies given by a boy.’” Though her parents divorced, the way she spoke of her parents indicated a supportive home environment that focused on the girls’ well-being and independence.

Although her parents experienced discrimination by the government because of their choices to have another child, Fang’s parents’ experiences do not necessarily represent her own. As the more academically gifted of the two sisters³³, and also as the younger of the two, she recognizes that she experiences some benefits. These benefits are similar to those experienced by the only children I interviewed.

Fang is not an only child, she is not the oldest child, and her advantages come from a different set of circumstances, and a different family circumstance. Fang’s sister stays close to their home and near their parents, and was not able to take advantage of the same educational opportunities Fang herself experienced. Much of this was circumstantial; due to the fact that Fang’s academic potential was better harnessed by the Chinese education system than her sister’s. However, Fang also expressed clearly that her sister’s determination to stay near their parents was related more closely to her status as older sister and oldest child than an expression of disappointment in an education system that she felt slighted her in previous years.

³³ She admits this despite the fact that it makes her uncomfortable. She explained in her interview that while her sister did not do as well as she did within the Chinese education system, she does not actually know if her sister could have gotten into a good University in China. She and her sister believe that when she took the college entrance examination she failed to write her name on a key portion of the test, and was not able to be admitted to any first-rate Universities.

I asked Fang what she thought would happen in the future in terms of taking care of her parents, curious to know if she would put her career goals on hold in order to tend to them, if necessary. This is how Fang expressed her thoughts on independence, and how the relationship she has with her parents in the future may be impacted by the fact that she has an older sister:

Many of my friends, they are all only child[ren], and even though they once wanted ... [to move] far away from family, they want[ed] to have their own career[s] in different big cities, but this year they just told me ... they want to go back home, want to accompany their parents because they are the only child in the family. But for me, my sister and I, we seldom think about this because... we are two daughters. And my sister, because of her boyfriend, she just want[s] to go home and stay with him, so that means ... she will stay at home with my parents. But for me, I don't have [these] worries. So I just want to go away from my home and have my own career. ...[If] I were the only child I think maybe I would have the same worries as my friends, because if our parents are getting older, then you have to accompany them. But because of my sister I think I don't [have to accompany them]-- I'm not very worried about that. And my parents said, "it's okay if you want to go... go to another city and work, even marry someone here [in the U.S.] it's okay." ...And my sister told me the same thing, said, "nevermind, I will accompany our parents."

The situation that only children face as their parents get older, and the responsibility that this entails, while something that she thinks about, is not something Fang has to consider

seriously. Because she has a sibling who stays close to home and does not intend to relocate, Fang experiences greater freedom. However, she does acknowledge that if she were an only child, she would likely take a different perspective and would wish to fill the role that her sister now fills.

Fang's situation, among my interviewees, was quite unique. In her experience, having an older sister was not only a comfort to her in times of great emotional upheaval in her family, it also gave her the freedom to pursue a future and a career away from her family and home province, even studying as an exchange student in the United States. She has experienced these privileges despite the difficulties faced by her family at the time when her mother was pregnant with her. She admits that having a sister has had benefits, and being the youngest has had benefits. In a way, Fang has had the best of both worlds. As the younger sibling in a time when education is a mark of privilege, she has taken advantage of having a sibling twice. Simultaneously, as the younger sibling she can rely on her sister to take care of their parents and continue her education.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Following the conclusion of my research I had an unofficial personal communication with a Chinese-American activist working in the field of child welfare in China. While she was never subject to regulation by the One-child policy, she has watched the effects it has had on China, and views the policy in both positive and negative lights. She described the policy to me as a solution for an unsolvable situation; in a way, a solution for something without a solution (Y. Chen, personal communication, Mar. 20, 2014). Because of the One-child policy millions of young Chinese men and women have grown up without the traditional family networks upon which their parents or grandparents might have relied. With China's shifting demographics, these only children bear greater responsibility for their families' well-being than individual children did past generations. However, many of them also experience greater opportunity, as was the case for many of the women I interviewed.

Throughout the interviews that I completed with Chinese international students I did not find that any one student's individual experiences could accurately represent the experiences of the entire group; on the contrary, each individual's story contained innumerable variables. While it was possible to trace parallels within the contexts of certain topic areas, the instances of individuality within my participants' life stories give me credible pause to consider the wealth of information that can be gathered through the type of research I completed. While there is certainly a place for quantitative data collection and analysis, I suggest that data seeking to generalize across experiences

cannot always properly describe the depth of individual experience. On the contrary, generalizability leaves out some of the most interesting and socially relevant information.

In her article about conducting life history interviews, Liu cites Shirley Dex's 1991 work in the same subject, writing that,

Dex suggested that life history data were very important because the past was vital to 'understanding the present' and that the life history provided the 'overlap in the chronology between individuals' lives and the social and institutional structures as well as between related individuals.' (Liu, 2006, p. 51; citing Dex, 1991, p. 1-2)

The interviews I conducted may not have been to the same scale as Liu's life history research, but in the detailed discussions with my eleven research participants each disclosed fascinating information that did not simply identify them as members of a larger social group, but established their individualities.

Their interviews raised important questions about the lives they led in China, their experiences with their families, and the decisions that they made in conjunction with their parents about their futures. They also raised questions about the expectations placed on Chinese children, and how the individuals that the Western media portrays as most affected by the One-child policy perceive themselves in relation to the policy. All had made the conscious decision to study abroad, with the support of their parents,³⁴ and all knew that parental and family pressure to succeed happened in China; but apart from these two points of commonality, every participant reported their experiences differently.

In the four areas of study on which I focused my analysis, some similarities did exist, which I detailed in Chapter III. There was a disconnect between what individuals

³⁴ As I mentioned in Chapter IV, Zhang Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) was the one possible exception to this, as her parents needed some convincing before they agreed that she should study in the United States.

reported as their overall experiences with gender and the ways they inserted gendered language and assumed traditional gender roles for themselves and others in their discussions. Many of my participants noted the existence of “traditional” ideas about gender or family-based gender roles that they used to juxtapose against their own experiences. I noticed several instances of this type of behavior, for example:

- As I mentioned in Chapter III, Xiaolian (X. Huang, personal communication, Nov. 22, 2013) spoke about gender issues that she and her boyfriend have talked about, and the expectations that are placed on men and women within Chinese society. She acknowledged that the differences exist, but also that she plays a role by supporting ideas about traditional masculinity by demanding that her boyfriend be a “strong man.” At the same time as she subverts ideas about traditional femininity by living a different and privileged life as a girl. This relates to Fong (2002) and Tsui and Rich’s (2002) analyses of single girl children using feminine and masculine gender stereotypes to their advantage within society while expecting masculinity only from men.
- Na (N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013) maintained a dependent relationship with her parents even though she had decided to study abroad far away from them. She went so far as to say that if she were in a relationship and her mother did not like her boyfriend, she would break off the relationship in order to make her parents happy.
- Min (M. Zhang, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2013) described the matchmaking process that her parents had gone through before getting married. Though she considers herself a strong feminist and independent actor, she

explained that match-making makes sense to her because she believes that people from the same social classes will have more in common, and therefore make better romantic matches. At the same time, she does not think she would use a matchmaker herself because she does not anticipate getting married in the future. She thinks there will not be any suitable men for her when the time comes because of her age and educational background.

These are only some of the examples from my interviews. These three examples portray a combination of tradition and modernity that has repercussions for gender and identity.

China is a country that has experienced a very special type of modernization. While I do not go into too much detail about how modernization has shaped today's Chinese society, the changes in gender roles can be seen as a reflection of modernization. To the women I interviewed, I believe that the fact that they did not consider gender to be something that affected their lives only indicates what they perceived rather than its' actual effect. On a deeper, more nuanced level, I believe that all of my participants continue to be affected by gender. This is in the same way that I believe gender inequality is still deeply ingrained in American society, or the way that American society is still profoundly affected by racial and ethnic inequalities. Just because my participants did not believe that they have been affected by issues of gender does not mean that is the case; in fact, because each of them engages in gender-based stereotyping in one way or other proves the opposite.

Participants were not nearly as adamant about the other general topics as they were about gender. Several agreed on certain educational experiences, on their relationships with their families, and on their views of the One-child policy. Still, two

participants indicated to me that they felt as though their lives had not been affected by the One-child policy in any way. This reaction struck me as strange, and I wondered if it could be the case that these particular families had made the personal decision to only have one child. One participant (N. Chen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2013) believed strongly that her parents had had her later in life (at age 30), meaning they probably had not wanted a child before or would not want to have another child after her.

However, those participants who acknowledged their relationship to the One-child policy did not all react the same way. Several believed that the policy had only affected them in indirect ways, while others (for instance those whose parents had sought to have another child, or who had decided to abort a fetus) understood it more directly. There was not a “normal” experience of the One-child policy, because each participant reported experiencing different things in her life.

Overall, there was no “standard” experience reflected among my participants in any one topic, or across multiple topics. My participants did not try to represent the experiences of others they had known, neither did many of them believe that their personal stories were noteworthy enough to speak about. On more than one occasion a participant asked me if I was getting anything useful out of her interview because she was only talking about things that had happened to her in her life. In these situations I had to assure the student that it was the personal stories she told me that were the basis for my research, and they were not superfluous information that would not benefit my goals in the long term.

Despite the lack of a “standard” experience, trends between my participants did manifest throughout the research. As discussed in Chapter III, the interviews showed that

while gender was not often listed as a determining factor in individuals' lives, acknowledgments of gender persisted. Individuals did not report a standard educational experience, but in the context of education many faced pressure and competition within classrooms and in society to perform at a certain level in order to succeed in the college entrance examination. Those whose personal methods of scholarship did not fit within the norm did not have the same opportunities to succeed. Participants did report feeling pressure to succeed and become successful, but these pressures came from multiple sources and not just from their parents. Many reported that they felt internal pressure to succeed, which overtook pressure from external sources. Finally, the majority of those who described their lives as being affected personally by the One-child policy identified both direct and indirect sources of influence. While individual answers varied, those who spoke about the effects of the One-child policy discussed the social merits and demerits of an urban society comprised of mostly single children.

However, trends could not cover the range of responses that my interviews yielded. The case studies in Chapter IV highlighted important differences in individual life accounts, and showed the ways that the individuals within my study group interacted with the external and internal forces acting on their lives. Through their individual stories, they demonstrated the power and importance of lived experience, and the value of looking beyond statistics, demographics, and trends.

When considering the dominant narratives that exist about a population, it is crucial to consider the ways that the population has been portrayed to those on the outside. The Western public has "learned" a great deal about Chinese only children from the media, and much of this has been based in either generalization or myth. The public has

learned that all Chinese children are only children, that they are all spoiled beyond measure, that they experience intense parental pressure to succeed because they are only children, that children who are also girls experience added pressure because their gender is a disappointment to their families, and that the education system leaves no room for creativity or individual expression.

In my research I aimed to interrogate the complexity of Chinese women's experiences. I recognize, and my research supports the idea that all women identify with many different social categories, including daughter, granddaughter, student, only child, sister, cousin, urban or rural resident. Each woman in my study is different, although the majority of them fit into a demographic group together. They offer a range of personal experiences because of the intersectional nature of their social locations that cannot be explained by any one of social categories with which they identify themselves.

The experiences of some women who are publicized through the media portrayals of the One-child policy are authentic to their own experiences, but not to all Chinese women or all Chinese people. There are many women in China who have brothers and sisters, many who are not forced to have abortions in the eighth month of pregnancy, and many whose parents decided to only have one for more than just political reasons. Similarly, there are many women who have had negative experiences with the policy, and many who have experienced invasive birth control measures such as forced sterilization. The experiences that are portrayed by the media about Chinese education, Chinese families, and only children may also be true of some people's experiences as well, but they cannot be generalized among the entire population of young Chinese people.

I believe that as an addition to the existing literature on gender, education, family relationships, and China's One-child policy, my research presents interesting opportunities for further study within these fields. While the focus of my research has centered on the experiences of urban women, a broader research study that compares the experiences of urban and rural women, or women in the transient working population would prove very useful in the study not only of the One-child policy's application across different populations in Chinese society, but also in the comparison of these populations. In terms of education, further study of the growing population of Chinese international students could prove beneficial for Universities in the United States and abroad as well as social scientists tracing the movement of people across borders.

Because of the limitations of my study I was not able to incorporate as many elements of inquiry into my study as I would have liked. Comparison and contrast were not among my primary objectives. However, were my study larger and had I had access to the right demographic group, I would have liked to include a broader socioeconomic population, more children with siblings, and different genders. While two genders could have been included in my study, for the size of my research I chose to target women to learn first-hand of their specific experiences.

My research and its timing raises questions about the expanding exceptions to the One-child policy, and suggests that further research on this population of young people should be completed now, particularly if the research relates to education. I anticipate that education reform and One-child policy reform will begin affecting the population of students going through higher education before too many years have passed. Scholars who wish to study the ways that these issues intersect in lived experience should do so

while adherence to the One-child policy is still required. Additionally, more extensive research on Chinese citizens who are considered exceptions to the One-child policy would prove productive social inquiry.

While a great deal of research has already been completed on the issues my study addresses, there remains a great deal of work still to do. My research has been my attempt to contribute to the existing literature that relates to China's only children, and their place within Chinese society. The intersectional nature of the lives of these individuals has made it necessary to consider their experiences in conjunction with the different social forces that have shaped them. These social forces, along with the single child status, have created a population of people with unique lived experience. By focusing on more than just the One-child policy and single child status, and broadening the research to include the discussions of gender, education and family dynamics, I hope to contribute complexity and nuance to stories that have already been told, and encourage others to investigate the wealth of individual experience encapsulated in the lives of Chinese only children.

In the context of media, I hope that my valuation of individual experience encourages a more thoughtful analysis of how the Western media portrays Chinese students, Chinese women and Chinese only children. Rather than relying on a set of generalized experiences or interpreting the experiences of one to be the experiences of all, I suggest a broader consideration of individuality. Just as the lives of the women I interviewed could not all properly represent one another, likewise the lives of a small number of women cannot be superimposed upon the lives of a larger population. The intersectionality of lived experience makes it necessary to consider each individual's story as valuable, and search for the common themes that breach the distance between those individuals.

APPENDIX

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Research Compliance Board-approved questions

Note on questions: Anytime you can illustrate your answer with an example or story, please share it!

- 1) When we met for tea/coffee/etc. I asked you to think about some experiences or stories that really explain what your family is like. Before we start with questions, will you share those thoughts with me?

[possible sub-question: why do you think this story is representative?]
- 2) Please describe your family. Who are they, where do they live, what are their approximate ages, how often do you see them.
- 3) If you can recall, how many brothers and sisters did/do your grandparents have? How about your parents? Do you have any cousins? If so, are they boys or girls?
- 4) Do your parents or grandparents talk about what it was like for them to grow up in a family of that size?
- 5) Do you feel like you have had different experiences growing up than your parents or grandparents? How/how not?
- 6) Tell me some more about your family history. For example, did your family relocate during the Cultural Revolution? How long has your family lived in [fill in blank City]? How did your parents meet and decide to get married?
- 7) When you lived at home during high school, what was a typical day like? Can you give me a timeline of what you did on a normal school day? What were differences between weekdays and weekends?
- 8) What did your parents expect you to do when you were at home? Homework, chores, etc.
- 9) Did you/do you feel a lot of pressure from your parents to do well in school? If so, how did/do they pressure you? If not, did you have friends whose parents pressured them to do well?
- 10) Tell me about what going to school was like for you. What kind of school did you go to? What were your classes and teachers like? Was it very competitive? What subjects were most difficult for you?

- 11) What kinds of interactions did you have with your peers and/or teachers in school? If you had difficulty studying a particular subject?
- 12) Do you feel like your school/teachers treated girls and boys the same or differently? How/how not?
- 13) Did you ever have an experience with a teacher or classmate in which you felt that being a girl was an academic disadvantage?
- 14) What was your experience when you took the college entrance examination?
- 15) How/why did you decide to study abroad? Were your parents/family members involved in the decision to study abroad? If so, how were they involved?
- 16) Have other family members gone to college? Did your parents want you to go to college, or want you to go to college specifically in the United States? Why/why not?
- 17) Are you interested in continuing your education after you finish your current degree? Why/why not?
- 18) What do you want to do when you finish at UO? What do your parents expect you to do when you finish? Do they want you to return to China right away? How do you feel about it?
- 19) Think back to the time you lived at home. Did you parents (mother or father) ever express their interest in having another child—if, for example, it had been possible under family planning laws? If yes, why?
- 20) What do you think your life would have been like if you had a sibling? A brother? Do you think you would have the same relationship with your parents? Do you think your education would have been different?
- 21) If you had had a brother, do you think you and he would have been treated the same at home and school or differently? How so/how not?
- 22) Do you feel like your parents expect you to do certain things because you are a daughter? Do you think they would expect different things from a son than they do from you? How?
- 23) Do you believe your parents expect different things from you than their parents expected from them? How/how not?
- 24) Do you feel like family planning (计划生育) has affected you personally? Why/why not? Will it affect you in the future? How/how not?
- 25) Please include any other comments you'd like to add.

Research Compliance-approved Informed Consent:
Consent #_____

University of Oregon Department of International Studies
Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in Master's Thesis Research
Title: Parental Expectations and Educational Attainment: Girls as Single Children in
China
Investigator: Samantha Gammons
Adult Consent form

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study about individual's experiences growing up as single children and women in urban China, specifically experiences related to family dynamics, education, and the studying abroad at the University of Oregon.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are an international student from a large Chinese city, a woman between ages 18 and 28, and an only child who graduated from high school in China before coming to UO. Participants in this study may come from different cities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and age groups.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study:

- The purpose of this study is to explore how being an only child may contribute to educational attainment, how it may affect gender relations and equality, how Chinese parents interact with their children and how children interpret their parents' expectations.
- Participants in this study are women from Chinese cities with more than one million residents, with a minimum of ten participants and maximum of twenty-five.
- Please note that the responsible investigator has no financial interest in research outcomes based on participant responses.

Description of the Study Procedures:

- If you agree to be in this study, we ask you to do (or have done) the following:
 - In advance of this interview, to have attended one pre-interview informal coffee/tea meeting of about one half-hour with Investigator. No information was collected at this time;
 - Attend one interview session with Investigator. Interviews will last between one and two hours;
 - Complete this informed consent form at the time of your interview session;
 - Listen carefully and answer questions to the best of your ability;
 - Questions will be mostly open-ended and refer to your experiences going to school in China and the United States, your experiences with your family, and your knowledge of your family history.
 - Your responses will be recorded (if you agree). The recording of your answers, as well as the researcher's notes during the interview, will be encrypted and kept in a secure locked location.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in the Study:

- This study may cause emotional discomfort in participants because of the personal nature of some questions. The likelihood of emotional discomfort is not yet known, and will depend on individual circumstance.
- There are no other reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

Benefits of Being in the Study:

- The purpose of the study is to better understand the links between single child status, gender, parental expectation, family dynamics, and education choices, while placing value on individual experience.
- The benefits of participation are personal. Participants may gain insight into their own educational choices and may learn the value of their individual experiences.

Payments:

- You will not receive any monetary reimbursement for participation. However, you will be offered one tutoring session to assist you with either one writing project (in English) of no more than three pages double-spaced, or one presentation (speaking only) of ten minutes or less. There is no monetary equivalent for this compensation.
- Tutoring sessions will be offered at a mutually convenient time and place on the UO campus, and may be requested during Fall 2013 or Winter 2014. You are limited to one session.

Costs:

- There is no cost to you to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality:

- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I may publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be encrypted and stored in a secure, locked file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Audio recordings will be accessed by the Investigator only, and will be stored in a secure, locked location. Audio files will be erased and any hard copies destroyed confidentially following thesis conclusion in June 2014.
- Access to the records will be limited to the Investigator; if requested, the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board and internal University of Oregon auditors may review the research records.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:

- Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University or the Department of International Studies.
- You are free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation.

- *You will be provided with any significant new findings that develop during the course of the research that may make you decide that you want to stop participating.

***Dismissal From the Study:**

- The investigator may withdraw you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) withdrawal is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted, (2) you have failed to meet the study requirements.

Contacts and Questions:

- The researchers conducting this study is Samantha Gammons. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her by e-mail at sgammons@uoregon.edu, or phone at 413-687-2299.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Research Compliance Services, University of Oregon at (541) 346-2510 or ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

Copy of Consent Form:

- You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Signatures/Dates

Study Participant (Print Name)

Participant Signature

Date

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